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THE IMPACT OF THE VIETNAM ANALOGY  
ON AMERICAN POLICY IN EL SALVADOR  
FROM 1979 TO 1984

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army  
Command and General Staff College in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

MICHAEL PATRICK BROGAN, MAJ, USA  
B.F.A., Ohio Wesleyan University, Delaware, Ohio, 1973

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas  
1994

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**94-30302**



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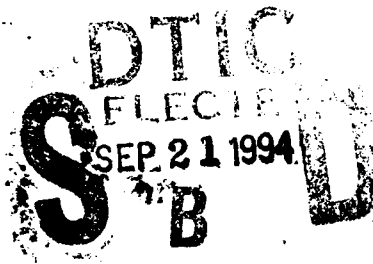
3 June 1994

Master's Thesis, 2 Aug 93-3 Jun 94

The Impact of the Vietnam Analogy on American  
Policy in El Salvador From 1979 to 1984

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This study outlines the influences that the outcome of the Vietnam War had on American foreign policy in another insurgency situation in the Republic of El Salvador during the formative years of that policy, 1979 to 1984. The presented concept shows how the emotional trauma of America's failure in Vietnam impacted on virtually all the players in this violent drama. Such an impact ultimately had an influence on the prosecution of the U.S. counterinsurgency plan and the push to eliminate some of the key underlying causes of conflict, finally influencing the outcome of the war. The study carefully outlines the scope of the Vietnam analogy and touches on all key policy aims of both the Carter and Reagan administrations in the context of America's cold war strategy in the region. Covered herein are the profound changes wrought in El Salvador which brought that nation from a floundering, quasi-democracy, with commonplace human rights abuses, to a real democracy with a transformed social and political structure and a gradual but significant increase in concern for human rights.

DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 3

Vietnam Analogy, Counterinsurgency Doctrine, Human Rights  
Abuses, Foreign Policy in El Salvador,  
Operations Other Than War

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DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 5

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

## ABSTRACT

THE IMPACT OF THE VIETNAM ANALOGY ON AMERICAN POLICY IN  
EL SALVADOR FROM 1979 TO 1984 by MAJ Michael Patrick  
Brogan, USA, 101 pages.

This study outlines the influences the Vietnam war had on American foreign policy in another insurgency situation in the Republic of El Salvador during the formative years of that policy, 1979 to 1984. The concept shows how the emotional trauma of America's failure in Vietnam impacted on virtually all the players in this violent drama. Such an impact ultimately had an influence on the prosecution of the U.S. counterinsurgency plan and the elimination of some of the key underlining causes of the conflict, eventually influencing the outcome of the war.

The study carefully outlines the scope of the Vietnam analogy and touches on all key policy aims of both the Carter and Reagan administrations in the context of America's cold war strategy in the region.

Covered herein are the profound changes wrought in El Salvador which brought that nation from a weak, quasi-democracy, with commonplace human rights abuses, to a real democracy, with a transformed social, political, and military structure and a gradual but distinct increase in concern for human rights.

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## DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to dedicate this work to the Armed Forces of El Salvador, particularly those who paid the ultimate price for victory. Despite the orientation of this work towards the effects of U.S. policy in El Salvador, let there be no misunderstanding. It was the officers and men of the Armed Forces of El Salvador who created the transformed Republic of El Salvador the world sees today.

Let me thank my lovely wife, Farrah, who "lost" me to this work for much of this year without complaint. Let me also thank Dr. John T. Fishel, an old Salvador hand, for his steady guidance and support, and Ann Cataldo and Don Vought for their sincere encouragement. Finally, let me thank my mother and father for teaching me, by example, the merit of hard work and dedication.



## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<u>ARENA</u>	Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Republican National Alliance)
<u>CD</u>	Convergencia Democratica (Democratic Convergence)
<u>ERP</u>	Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo (People's Revolutionary Army)
<u>ESAF</u>	El Salvador Armed Forces
<u>FMLN</u>	Farabundo Marti Frente de la Liberation Nacional (Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front)
<u>GOES</u>	Government of El Salvador
<u>PDC</u>	Partido Democrata Cristiana
<u>USMILGRP</u>	United States Military Group
<u>USSOUTHCOM</u>	United States Southern Command

CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Historical Perspective

Extract from the 1981 Senate hearings on Foreign Relations, reference the situation in El Salvador:

THE CHAIRMAN. Is there a danger, in your judgement, Secretary Stoessel, that history could repeat itself, that we could be getting into another quagmire like Vietnam in El Salvador and in Central America?

AMBASSADOR STOESEL. Mr. Chairman, I would say that all of us are aware of this analogy. I agree with you that it is not a correct analogy. But the lessons of the past are very much with us...we are determined that this situation will not develop into another Vietnam.<sup>1</sup>

In 1979, four years since the fall of Saigon, the American failure in Vietnam had deeply etched itself on the national consciousness. The Vietnam experience had perhaps divided the nation like no other event since the American Civil War. During the period of the Vietnam War, social upheaval, political radicalization, the eroding of traditional, family, social and military values ushered in an era of uncertainty, mistrust, and bitterness. Significant reflective literature now illuminates the high and low points and lessons learned from America's Vietnam experience. But in 1979 such literature was in its infancy.

President Jimmy Carter summed up the impact of the American failure in Vietnam:

We were taught that our armies were always invincible and our causes were always just, only to suffer the agony of Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

Particularly tainted by the humiliation in Vietnam was American foreign policy. Self confidence was low.

President Carter noted:

The Vietnamese war produced a profound moral crisis sapping worldwide faith in our own policy and our system of life, a crisis of confidence made even more grave by the covert pessimism of some of our leaders.<sup>3</sup>

In 1979, the United States watched uncomfortably as one crisis after another erupted around the world. The Soviets invaded Afghanistan. There was a coup in South Korea. America had already abrogated its treaties with both Vietnam and Taiwan in this decade. The Carter administration's threat to pull all U.S. troops out of Korea and pressuring of Korea on human rights issues seriously affected American esteem in the eyes of the Korean government.<sup>4</sup>

During the same year, in Iran, America watched the Shah fall from power and the American embassy and staff fall into the hands of Muslim fundamentalists who rejected all diplomatic efforts to gain their release. There were Selective Service riots in the United States as America contemplated her commitment to an all volunteer force. The American people had lost confidence in their government and

were suffering from a pervading pessimism. In 1979, even President Carter acknowledged:

The symptoms of this crisis of the American spirit are all around us. For the first time in the history of our country the majority of our people believe that the next five years will be worse than the past five years.<sup>5</sup>

Close to home, in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas had just concluded a stunning victory over the dictatorial regime of Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Slowly, the Sandinistas moved closer to doctrinal Marxist-Leninism. Their Cuban backers seemed intent on supporting revolution throughout the region.<sup>6</sup>

Fear and panic gripped the nations of Central America. In both Guatemala and Honduras businessmen shipped their money overseas and braced themselves for the coming revolution.<sup>7</sup> In El Salvador, protesters against a perceived dictatorial regime, were shot in front of the National Cathedral.

Nowhere was the concern for the spread of revolution felt more intensely than in El Salvador. A small, densely populated country of some 5 million people, El Salvador offered an example of corrupt politics, abject poverty, and social injustice similar to neighboring Nicaragua.<sup>8</sup> In the years leading up to the war in El Salvador, the Salvadoran ruling classes felt that brute force, as always, would keep things under control. But young, forward looking, Army officers correctly concluded that the wave of revolution

sweeping the region would soon engulf El Salvador unless radical steps were taken to correct the horrendous injustices which were so much a part of Salvadoran existence.

In October 1979, these army officers, united with reform minded political leaders, launched a bloodless coup, and proposed an ambitious program of desperately needed reforms. But the threatened ruling class, aided by conservative military officers, resisted. As the Junta's power slowly ebbed El Salvador broke out in bloody confrontation and eventual civil war which would claim the lives of over 75,000 citizens by its end in 1992.

American foreign policy of the time was centered around concern for human rights. Carter "reaffirmed commitment to human rights as a fundamental tenet of our foreign policy." He had hoped that by taking the moral high ground, and avoiding confrontational, cold war politics, the U.S. could avoid the mistakes of Vietnam. In 1977, the President stated:

For too many years, we've been willing to adopt the flawed and erroneous principles and tactics of our adversaries, sometimes abandoning our own values for theirs. We've fought fire with fire, never thinking that fire is better quenched with water. This approach failed, with Vietnam the best example of its intellectual and moral poverty.<sup>10</sup>

The administration was bothered by the events unfolding in Nicaragua and the rest of Central America. Carter's attitude towards human rights had made assistance

to the abuse prone republics of Central America difficult. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance rejected using a rigid formula for application of support for human rights. Vance tried to clarify,

If we are determined to act, the means available range from quiet diplomacy in its many forms through public pronouncements to withholding assistance. Whenever possible, we will use positive steps of encouragement and inducement. Our strong support will go to countries that are working to improve the human condition.<sup>11</sup>

However, Cuban influences in the region were coming to light and creating a dilemma for the administration. Richard Thornton in The Carter Years: Toward a New Global Order states that,

The Cuban role in the final phase of the Nicaraguan revolution was of particular concern to the Carter leadership . . . . Worse, intelligence began to appear showing increased Cuban support for communist guerrilla movements in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.<sup>12</sup>

It was slowly becoming apparent that Nicaragua was sliding into the Soviet camp. Although the United States still contributed considerable economic aid to Nicaragua, American influence in the internal events in Nicaragua was falling to near zero. Moderates were slowly being pushed out of Nicaraguan political life, and it seemed too late to affect the courses of events.

In El Salvador, a plea for aid in the struggle against communism was weakened by the barbarous acts committed by right wing death squads against the opposition. The U.S. Department of State reported up to 800 civilian

political deaths per month in 1980 linked to death squad or suspicious activity.<sup>13</sup> At the time, many Americans thought that the government of El Salvador showed little sign of reform or democratization. This was in spite of the fact that the new Junta seemed serious about implementing critically needed land reforms. The Salvadoran armed forces and security forces appeared to Americans to be little more than thugs at the exclusive service of the oligarchy. Attempts at political or social reform seemed to spark more repression. The Salvadoran military had opened fire on demonstrators in the streets. And in one famous case, members of the Salvadoran National Guard (the rural police force) were alleged to have raped and murdered four American churchwomen.

The specter of American military intervention in Central America was raised. For the first but not the last time in American history the analogy of "Another Vietnam" was used.

The public was becoming wary of repeating the bitter experiences of only a few years before. Just after President Ronald Reagan took office, a Gallup Poll found "63% of Americans fear escalation of U.S. involvement [in El Salvador] into a Vietnam-like scenario."<sup>14</sup> By February, 1982, a Newsweek Magazine poll showed "89% of Americans familiar with the Reagan policy in El Salvador did not want the U.S. to send troops, 60% were against supplying military

equipment, and 54% wanted the U.S to keep its hands off altogether."<sup>15</sup>

President Reagan took office for the start of what would be twelve years of Republicanism. As the Iran hostage debacle subsided, Reagan turned his focus to Central America. Reagan's interest in Central America was totally different from Carter's. He saw El Salvador from a cold war perspective. A State Department publication of the period shows:

Cuba, the Soviet Union, and other Communist states...are carrying out what is clearly shown to be a well coordinated, covert effort to bring about the overthrow of El Salvador's established government and to impose in its place a Communist Regime with no popular support.<sup>16</sup>

President Ronald Reagan saw the struggle largely in global, strategic terms and linked troubles in Central America to overall Soviet expansionism around the world. His administration embarked on a massive defense buildup and included the war in El Salvador as part of his overall strategy of containment.

#### The Research Question

The purpose of this research is to measure: " The Impact of the Vietnam Analogy on American Policy in El Salvador from 1979 to 1984." The research identifies the length and breadth of the Vietnam analogy as well as its impact on American foreign policy in El Salvador in these formative years.



For better or worse, America has always applied the lessons of the last war to the next war. Scarcely four years after America's failure in Vietnam, we became involved in the foreign internal defense (FID) of the Republic of El Salvador, triggered by that Central American country's pivotal 1979 coup d'etat. This was America's first significant military commitment since the fall of the Saigon Regime in 1975.

Vietnam seemed to be the yardstick by which we were going to measure our success or failure in El Salvador. From 1979 to 1983 a great debate raged in the public forums of the media, on college campuses, at congressional hearings, in the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and at the White House. The debate centered on America's experience in Vietnam and how this applied to El Salvador. On one hand some claimed that the U.S. was embarking on another Vietnam, something which would ultimately lead to failure. On the other hand, government officials carefully developed strategies and policies that were designed to deliberately avoid the mistakes of Vietnam.

The purpose here is to focus on impact of the analogy. Sometimes the analogy can be seen as a clearly defined link to the Vietnam experience. In other cases, misconceptions and apprehensions from the Vietnam experience obfuscated the national policy decisions towards El Salvador. It is immaterial to the research if policy in El

Salvador was formed by careful study of the application of the successes and failures of the Vietnam situation or as an emotional reaction to a difficult period in American history. If El Salvador's policy impact came from the influences of the Vietnam experience, whatever the source, then it is of interest to this research. This research avoids focusing too much on America's policy towards Vietnam. Vietnam's successes and failures are a concern only to the extent that they affected American policy towards El Salvador. El Salvador is the primary focus. Researching certain policies in El Salvador can establish whether the policy was influenced by American experiences in Vietnam.

By reviewing the era, the research will show the extent of influence of the Vietnam experience on the events as they unfolded. At the time, programs and commitments were implemented which were to stand for thirteen years as the framework for policy in El Salvador. The key hypothesis of this research is that the Vietnam legacy did influence U.S. policy in El Salvador.

#### Methodology of The Research

This research starts with the hypothesis that America's failure in Vietnam did impact on American policy in El Salvador in the years 1979 to 1983. This phenomenon of the "Vietnam analogy" reveals itself alternately in both obvious and obscure manners. Ample evidence exists to

establish the hypothesis for the analogy. From the essential hypothesis that there is, in fact, an analogy at work on American foreign policy during the critical years of El Salvador's insurgency, 1979 to 1984, flows a naturally correlating stream of inquiries and corresponding responses to build to a logical conclusion. Outlined below is the format for the methodology of the research.

#### Introduction: Setting the Stage

Almost all the literature reviewed for this research contains some historical overview of the history of El Salvador. Typically, the histories generally give a light overview of Colonial and 19th century history, and come into sharp focus with a review of the 20th century events leading up to the insurgency of 1979 to 1992.

This research avoids historical overviews of El Salvador, since the focus is on American policies there and less on Salvadoran internal struggles. Thus, the initial focus of the research is to recreate the history, moods and influences that were prevalent in the initial American involvement in 1979. That year is crucial to understanding the impact of Vietnam on American foreign policy because it was a unique transition year in America's post Vietnam foreign policy malaise, and was also the prelude to transition for the two very different Carter and Reagan administrations. It is essential to place the reader in the milieu of the period so that a clearer understanding of the

forces at work in American foreign policy come into sharp focus.

#### The Sources: A Review of the Literature

After a review of the literature it becomes apparent that the majority of the literature available on El Salvador is opposed to U.S. involvement there. Since it is impossible to review the literature as a comparison of literature for and against the U.S. policy in the region, it is necessary to search for some other means of comparison which gives a balanced review. The review therefore covers the differences in types of literature that deal with the highly emotional subject of the war in El Salvador and the American response to it.

A comparison is drawn between those works presenting an emotional approach and those works presenting an objective approach. This dichotomy allows a careful balance of emotional argument and careful review of the facts to present a more balanced view of what really happened. For particular relevance to this research, it is essential to stick to works which contain specific references to the Vietnam analogy. While this eliminates from the review some excellent source books on El Salvador, it nonetheless allows the research to be more focused.

## Defining the Hypothesis: The Analogy at Work

Chapter II deals with the essential establishment of a solid definition of the Vietnam analogy as it applies to El Salvador. This detailed and well documented section deals exclusively with the analogy. There is, then, no doubt in the reader's mind what this critical part of the research means. Since the analogy meant different things to different groups, examples from various players show how the analogy was manipulated to achieve some political aim.

Careful analysis of the analogy covers a review of the situation, history and relevance of the analogy in the research. With this foundation the research can move on to the second pillar of the research--a definition of policy.

## Limiting the Boundaries: Defining the Policy

Chapter II also explains the second part of the research question--the policy. The policy is divided into three sections: military reform, economic reform, and political reform. Benjamin Schwarz's definitive work American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador provides much of the research source material necessary to pin down specific policy points. A detailed analysis with supportive evidence clearly establishes the policies of both the Carter and Reagan administrations covered in the framework of the research. While Carter and Reagan had widely different views of cause and effect in the counterinsurgency, nonetheless the policies implemented by both administrations

are remarkably similar. Specific attention is given to those policy issues which show the link with Vietnam. Not everything done to assist El Salvador draws on the Vietnam analogy. However, sufficient policy decisions do. It is essential to first make a precise definition of those policies.

#### The Argument: Analysis and Interpretation

The hypothesis is established and definitions are clarified. The focus has been made in the review of the literature. It is now time to describe the intense struggle which went on in America to formulate American policy in El Salvador. To be sure, the argument was both scholarly and visceral. Thus, a carefully laid out analysis, showing the wide range of forces at work, is necessary to understanding the analogy at work. There are basically only two sides to this argument--for or against. There are nuances of both opposition and support, but the opposing camps do lend themselves to a concise pro and con analysis.

#### Tying It All Together: Conclusions

The final section must inevitably tie all the information into a conclusion which shows the main focus of the research--the impact of the Vietnam analogy on policy. After understanding the forces at work, the supporting documentation and defining the issues involved, a clear picture emerges of the successes and failures of American

foreign policy in El Salvador. At this juncture it must be pointed out specifically which policies were successful and which failed because of the application of the Vietnam analogy, as well as those which remained unaffected by the analogy.

It is also essential to show the significance of the analogy and its study to the world today. In the rapidly changing world of the post cold war, El Salvador, and how America dealt with it becomes critical. The conclusion ties the lessons learned from a critical period in American foreign policy and shows what can apply to the chaos of the current world "order."

### Review of the Literature

#### Introduction

It is extremely difficult to study the last decade of Salvadoran history without feeling emotional about it. War, repression, murder, injustice, corruption; this is highly charged stuff. Many authors succumb to the emotional pull of the issues and their arguments reflect this submission. Others resist the temptation to become emotionally involved and give the situation the objective review that such a complex situation merits. Nonetheless, the majority of the literature on El Salvador, and more specifically reviews of the influence of Vietnam on the policies in El Salvador, reflect a negative view of American involvement.

One can divide the literature into two overlapping categories. The first category, the emotional approach, shows a profound dedication to oppose U.S. involvement in Central America. The second category, the objective approach, attempts to portray a balanced picture of American policy. While many superb books exist in both categories, not all directly tie into the research on the importance of the Vietnam analogy. Therefore, in both instances this review will present those works which best demonstrate either emotional or objective approaches and likewise make use of the critical Vietnam analogy.

#### The Emotional Approach

As in Vietnam, American policy in El Salvador brought a backlash of opposition. Perhaps because El Salvador followed the highly unpopular war in Vietnam by only a few years, the opposition seemed to be quicker to take action against the situation as it developed in throughout Central America. And perhaps due to the perceived success of tactics the opposition used during the Vietnam era, similar tactics were employed towards policy in El Salvador.

One of those tactics designed to undermine the legitimacy of the American government's policies in the region was to form a "war crimes trial". Evidently, this would give the immediate perception that what was happening there was somehow criminal. A good look at such a trial is



available in editors Paul Ramshaw's and Tom Steer's Intervention on Trial: The New York War Crimes Tribunal on Central America and the Caribbean. It is a powerful collection of testimonies unabashedly dedicated to reducing or eliminating American intervention in both Central America and the Caribbean. This unofficial war crimes trial was held in New York in October 1984, and was sponsored by the National Lawyers Guild, Central America Task Force.<sup>17</sup> While unofficial, the tribunal which heard the testimony was loaded with impressive "judges," such as Stanley Faulkner, who in a direct link to protests against American policy in Vietnam, served as a member of the Law Commission of 1967 Bertrand Russell International War Crimes Tribunal on Vietnam (another unofficial tribunal).

To add some dignity to the trials the Honorable Bruce McM. Wright, justice of the New York Supreme Court, was included. Presumably, these personnel were selected to give legitimacy to an otherwise legally impotent tribunal.

Following legal guidelines ranging from the U.S. Constitution to the U.N. Charter, it gathered strong testimony to solidly condemn U.S. Intervention in the region. Notwithstanding the stature of the members of the tribunal, the tribunal and the book's basic purpose--to bring shame to the continued American involvement in El Salvador--undercuts its ability to be fair and impartial.

The section dealing with El Salvador is replete with extremely gruesome photographs of death squad victims, napalm and white phosphorous burn victims, rape victims, etc. But as damning as the photographic evidence is, the testimony is worse.

Again the Vietnam analogy surfaced. Specifically, the testimony of author-activist Frank Brodhead deals with comparisons with Vietnam. Brodhead, curiously enough, seems to criticize the most important tool that the U.S. used to promote democracy, and the key to political reform in El Salvador--free elections. Brodhead's cynical suspicions of U.S. motives in both Vietnam and El Salvador are clearly evident:

There is a long history of corrupt and staged elections in the world, and numbers of cases where the United States has condoned, supported, or sponsored such elections. The traditional goal of U.S. support for such elections has been to install in office a candidate favored by our government.

But the staged elections...in Vietnam in 1967, and in El Salvador in 1982 and 1984 were something new. The goal of these elections was to legitimize in the eyes of the U.S. public U.S. intervention in other countries' affairs. These demonstration elections were the first cautious response to the Vietnam syndrome, the domestic dissent against the imperial enterprise.<sup>18</sup>

Further testimony by Robert Armstrong, Executive Director of the North American Congress on Latin America, attacked the entire history of modern El Salvador. He cited corruption and oppression since the beginning of this century, but as he warmed to his subject he criticized the

military involvement most of all, mentioning objections to financial aid and political assistance, thereby covering all areas of U.S. policy concerns. His closing argument made full use of the Vietnam analogy:

. . . the United States' strong support of the current regime in El Salvador will lead to a long term commitment to that regime that will be difficult to back away from. We have chosen sides in this struggle, and we have become committed to a military defeat of the rebel forces. To achieve that defeat, we might easily have to send in U.S. combat troops and become involved in a replay of the Vietnam War.<sup>19</sup>

His arguments clearly equated the Vietnam analogy with endless commitment. Such an argument was not new. But its introduction in 1984, when massive U.S. military intervention was clearly ruled out as an option is stretching the point.

As emotional as the tribunal was, other forms of opposition surfaced as literature designed to explained to the confused American public just what was happening in a tiny Central American nation. Much of this literature, follows the same pattern--a sordid trip through El Salvador's bloody history followed by condemnation of America's current involvement there.

A good example of this literature, which specifically uses the Vietnam analogy to add to its emotional impact was Walter Lefeber's highly charged work Inevitable Revolutions: The United States In Central America. As the title already indicated, this was a

condemnation of U.S. involvement in the region. Like much of the leftist literature generated against U.S. involvement in the region (and there was a considerable amount of it) a certain cynicism permeated it. The portions dealing with El Salvador presented the history of this tiny nation as almost comic opera, interspersed with periods of inevitable repression and cruelty. Its low opinion of El Salvador's achievements over the last century in particular were almost racist in their condemnation. Perhaps this was why the author considered revolution "inevitable". Inevitably pertinent to this research was LeFeber's cynical view of the Vietnam analogy as a "raison d'etre" for American involvement in El Salvador:

After the experiences of Vietnam, many North Americans were reluctant to become involved in another indigenous revolution. The new administration and its supporters tried to circumvent that problem by declaring, in the president's words, the Vietnam conflict was a "noble cause," and--more important--the problems in Central America were not indigenous but caused by Castro and the Soviet Union....The mistakes in Vietnam would not be repeated; instead of trying to solve the problem within only Central America, the administration intended to "go to the source" of the problem. The phrase meant a possible attack on Cuba, since Castro's regime, in the words of Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Thomas Enders, "is a Soviet surrogate."<sup>20</sup>

LeFeber's book, while containing many interesting observations, was nonetheless an emotional diatribe against any form of U.S. involvement in general and a forthright condemnation of the Reagan administration in particular. He lost credibility by focusing on the emotional aspects of the

conflict and expressing a clear distrust of American foreign policy in the region. And again, while portraying the Salvadoran government as totally incapable of solving its own problems, it portrayed the United States as the aggressor for trying to help. His "inevitable" solution is to let the revolution unfold unopposed for the betterment of Central America.

In much the same emotional vein as LeFeber, and also using the Vietnam analogy, Cynthia Arnson presented a powerful emotional appeal against U.S. involvement in El Salvador in her El Salvador: A Revolution Confronts the United States. It was full of examples of injustice and cruelty and page after page of the sad history of both El Salvador's failure to promote a just society and American intervention in Central America. It came to the conclusion that the current revolution was simply a product of historical failure by both El Salvador and the United States. The revolution should, therefore, be allowed to run its course unfettered by American Cold War posturing and American intervention in third world affairs. Arnson charges that the Reagan administration's goal was to focus on the cold war aspects rather than the social causes of the revolution. She notes: "Like Vietnam, El Salvador and its internal strife are being cast in the spotlight of the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union."<sup>21</sup>

While the FMLN was preparing for a war of attrition after its failed "Final Offensive", and increased polarization made negotiations difficult between the parties involved, Arnson accused the Reagan administration of using the Vietnam analogy to force it to rule out negotiation as a tool for ending the conflict:

The specter of Vietnam that huddled over the debate acquired new urgency in the face of administration statements: [then Assistant Secretary of State] Enders presented a stark choice between the Duarte government and one dominated by Communist insurgents. By defining the latter as totally unacceptable and rejecting a middle path--negotiation--as "giving the country away", Enders set up El Salvador as an all-or-nothing proposition.<sup>22</sup>

Arnson's work made ample use of the Vietnam analogy showing it as an impetus for certain policy decisions. But she failed to note why the analogy was used to alter the way America would do business in El Salvador. She did not see the difference between the use of 55 military advisors in El Salvador and the massive U.S. military intervention in Southeast Asia.

#### The Objective Approach

Perhaps it was necessary to let some years pass before the emotional ardor associated with America's initial involvement in the counterinsurgency subsided. While it became increasingly evident that there was little chance of massive U.S. intervention, the nature of the insurgency also seemed to change imperceptibly as the FMLN gradually lost

the support of the masses, the ESAF managed a consistent strategy, and the Government of El Salvador (GOES) implemented internationally observed, free elections in 1985 and 1988 (Assembly) and 1984 and 1989 (Presidential).

Perhaps the best view of this later period of U.S. involvement in the war in El Salvador, and its subsequent more objective presentation was Benjamin Schwarz's American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and Illusions of Nation Building. Schwarz's book served as almost an after-actions report for the total of the American effort in El Salvador. It was sponsored by the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, and conducted in the National Defense Institute, by the highly respected RAND Corporation. This thoughtful and carefully analytical book, outlined the successes and failures of all American efforts to defeat the counterinsurgency in El Salvador, while highlighting "the political and social dimensions of American counterinsurgency policy in El Salvador, the site of the United States' most important and extensive low-intensity conflict since the Vietnam War."<sup>23</sup>

The particular value of Schwarz's efforts was in his use of U.S. government, primary source material, and his consideration and respect for the careful American efforts to "not flounder as we did in Vietnam."<sup>24</sup> To gauge the success of policy in El Salvador, he looked to Vietnam as a yardstick to measure that success. Schwarz recognized that

American policy makers were ever mindful of the weight of the Vietnam analogy. Two full chapters were given over to "American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Shadow of Vietnam"<sup>25</sup> and "Vietnam, El Salvador, and the Future of Low-Intensity Conflict."<sup>26</sup>

In his research he clearly outlined the three pillars of U.S. policy--military, economic, and political reform. But he distills the very essence of the American mindset in El Salvador, vis-a-vis Vietnam:

Although some officials in the Reagan administration at first believed that the only important objective was to effect the quickest and most efficient annihilation of guerrillas, El Salvador came to represent the most important effort to apply the lesson of Vietnam: namely, it takes development and democracy, not just military force, to root out revolution.<sup>27</sup>

He knew that Vietnam always played a role in how and why we did things. This was a conscious decision by the American military as well as political decision makers:

From the beginning, American military officials and policymakers were anxious to avoid in El Salvador the overly conventional approach that they believed had led them astray in Vietnam.<sup>28</sup>

Schwartz's success in documenting American efforts in El Salvador was due to his careful attention to motivation of decision making as well as the mechanics of its implementation.

By 1989, with military stagnation starting to give way to negotiated settlement, a group of experienced researchers from the National Security Archive, started to



gather the enormous volume of source material covering the war years in El Salvador. Their efforts produced El Salvador: The Making of U.S. Policy, 1977-1984. It was an interesting research source package relating exclusively to El Salvador. It brought valuable documents into a single, easy-to-track location. The National Security Archive is not as official sounding as its title would imply. It is a non-profit organization which "identifies, locates, acquires, organizes, indexes and disseminates internal government documents pertinent to important issues of U.S. defense, foreign, intelligence, and international economic policy."<sup>29</sup>

In direct contrast to the tribunal members selected in Intervention on Trial: The New York War Crimes Tribunal on Central America and the Caribbean advisors to the National Security Archive were formed from a remarkably wide range of people to include former government officials and retired military officers. It was difficult to find any bias or personal agenda in the pages of the archives. All the material presented seemed to be there solely for serious scholarship of policy in El Salvador. As such it presented the accurate image of a fair and impartial source. The Archive staff, advised by a panel of guiding experts, attempted to collect from unclassified (including declassified works) but "unpublished government reports,

official court records, presidential library materials and retired government records, etc."<sup>30</sup>

Most important to this research was the Archive's system of hanging all pertinent data on an extensive chronology of the period. Not merely a list of important dates, the chronology gave a blow-by-blow description of all aspects of the period which affected American foreign policy in the region. It even included a comprehensive chronology of the U.S. military advisor build up to its final 55 man count. The chronology's format permitted this research to track increasing public and congressional opposition to foreign policy in El Salvador, as well as administration and Pentagon efforts to counter or soften opposition. For example, it reported that in late March, 1981:

President Reagan and key members of Congress are receiving hundreds of letters weekly opposing U.S. policy in El Salvador, as demonstrations, vigils and hunger strikes on the issue take place across the U.S.<sup>31</sup>

Clearly emerging from all this was a link with the Vietnam analogy and its unique effect on policy.

Historically accurate, and as free of bias as possible in this highly emotional arena, it tracked, from 1932, American efforts to influence events in the region, including, for example, a revelation that as early as 1957 the "U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) [sic] [began] funding for training of Salvadoran security forces."<sup>32</sup>

The increasing fears of the Carter administration that El Salvador would go the way of Nicaragua is expressed in the once highly classified document revealing that:

Asst. Sec. of State Viron Vaky notifies the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador that he will "undertake consultations on Central America, specifically on El Salvador and the northern tier." He comments that his "main purpose will be to probe [president of El Salvador] Romero's post-Somoza analysis and the near future."<sup>33</sup>

Following increasing protest against U.S. policy in El Salvador around the world, and fears among the American people that El Salvador would turn into another Vietnam, President Reagan, in a televised news conference on 18 February 1982 "although refusing to discuss options for supporting the Salvadoran government, says there are no plans to send American combat troops there."<sup>34</sup>

Such information, laid out in clear, chronological order, fully supported with proper documentation, gives a remarkable overview of the wide spread of complex events which occurred in El Salvador during the period concerning this research.

Not all objective works about the situation in El Salvador were produced by scholars. Strangely enough a significant work was produced by the journalist Tommie Sue Montgomery. Although her work Revolution in El Salvador: Origins and Evolution was written in 1982, and was therefore dangerously close, from a research perspective, to the events it covers, it nonetheless presented a clear and well

documented study of the insurgency. Like almost all literature on El Salvador it contained a history of the country, starting with the origins of the revolution in the 19th century. What separated this work from the majority of leftist literature available on revolution in El Salvador, was that it continued its careful historical perspective, fully substantiated by credible research sources, up to events which happened only shortly before the work was published. It even gave a history of all the major FMLN political and military factions and a detailed description and history of liberation theology, its origins, and application to El Salvador.

While not hiding her sympathy with the left, Montgomery's careful review of the facts, use of primary source research, and linear presentation of events built a powerful story of repression and revolution. An additional plus was her unwillingness to condemn outright the dangerous characters in the vast and complex story. She lets the facts speak for themselves.

While she introduced the Vietnam analogy, she kept its application focused on influences in American foreign policy, generally avoiding emotional links between Vietnam and El Salvador. In particular, she described the 1982 political pressures being exerted on the administration by the Vietnam analogy:

Yet, the forces weighing in against the Reagan policy in El Salvador by early 1982 were

increasingly strong and vocal. Within the government, the Department of Defense, in particular the Joint Chiefs of Staff, under no circumstances wanted to get involved in another Vietnam-like quagmire. The White House domestic policy staff saw their grand plan for restructuring U.S. society placed in jeopardy by the civil war in El Salvador. The Congress was divided. Republicans in both the House of Representatives and the Senate had been expressing opposition for months. Cracks in the Republican rank and file began to show when Senator Larry Pressler expressed skepticism publicly and noted his conservative constituents in South Dakota did not want to get involved in another Vietnam.<sup>35</sup>

Montgomery's strength was her true objective approach to a highly emotional subject. Her use of the Vietnam analogy was used not to conjure up ghosts from America's past but to show the strong undercurrents at work in the shaping of policy in Central America. This significant effort on her part was extremely valuable to enhancing this research.

As seen above, one must keep an open mind when reviewing the diverse literature and research material relating the Vietnam analogy. One can not simply discard the emotional literature. It shows the strength of the vigorous opposition to American policy in El Salvador. But the objective works serve to keep things in their proper perspective and serve to more fairly analyze what impact Vietnam did have on the way the U.S. conducted business in El Salvador.

### Background

I am a United States Army officer, who had the privilege and luck to be assigned to the United States Military Group - El Salvador (USMILGRP) as Communications Officer from 1987 to 1989. It was the most professionally fulfilling job of my career. I operated an office and maintenance facility out of the American Embassy in San Salvador, installed and operated a 24 hour communications center in the Salvadoran joint staff headquarters (Estado Mayor) war operations center, and flew constantly around the country to install and maintain communications assets for the military advisors scattered around the country. My contact with virtually every military advisor, my visits to every department (state) in El Salvador, my contacts with Salvadoran Officers both at the Estado Mayor and in the field, and long discussions with high level embassy officials gave me a unique insight into both the world of policy and its resultant implementation.

I was well trained for my assignment before I got to El Salvador--in fact, I had never before been so well prepared for an assignment. I was required to learn Spanish fluently, learn the legalities and pitfalls security assistance management, such as Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and the Military Assistance Program (MAP). I received cultural sensitivity training, anti-terrorist training and

finally a few weeks of job-specific, communications training.

Upon arrival in the country, I was given a plethora of briefings from both the MILGRP and the Embassy on what I could and could not do. I could, however, feel the shadow of Vietnam hovering over everything we did or did not do. I got the distinct impression that we were out to do it right this time around.

But no training, no preparation, prepared me for the surprise I received when I realized that the El Salvador I saw when I got off the plane was radically different from the El Salvador I had learned about in books, classes, in the television and print media, and in the movies.

I witnessed concerned Salvadoran Air Force officers call off bombing raids because too many civilians lived in the area. I saw Salvadoran doctors and nurses feverishly providing critical trauma care to horribly wounded soldiers.

I saw a military which kept its hundreds of amputees (the product of FMLN mine tactics) on the payroll and in the units. I saw the incredible toughness and bravery of the Salvadoran soldier when properly led. I saw a resilient and stalwart people suffer the cruel indignities of war with spirit, elan and an incredible capacity for suffering.

I also saw the negative side of life in El Salvador. I saw blatant corruption, incompetence, cowardice and stupidity. But I saw no death squads, no indiscriminate

shooting of civilians, and no brutal oppression. To be sure, examples of this happened in El Salvador and the early eighties are peppered with examples.

I remember vividly the first time the incoming American Ambassador, William Walker briefed the MILGRP in 1989. Walker had previously served in El Salvador in the repressed decade of the 1970s. He was quite frank in telling us that he was startled at the changes he saw in the current Salvadoran military when he compared it to the military of the seventies. He said that the quality of the current military in El Salvador was a direct result of the efforts of the MILGRP and that we should be proud of our accomplishments. To me, this was the most striking example of what United States foreign policy had accomplished in a few short years.

While in El Salvador I saw death by suspicious means drop to an average of about 35 a month<sup>36</sup> (right or left wing death squad activities and non-combat related deaths.) In 1980 it had been as high as 800 a month. The majority of the killings in 1988 now came from the left rather than the right.

Where was the great boogie man of the liberal press, the brutal Salvadoran military? If this brutality existed, I never saw it as described by the American media. I never saw an instance or evidence of the death squads. I saw clever Civic Action and Psychological operations which the



Salvadorans used clumsily, but with partial success, to steal the heart of the people away from the guerrillas. (They never really won the hearts of the people, but they did manage to undercut guerrilla support.)

But what I saw, or perhaps did not see, reflected somewhat on the success of U.S. policy in reducing the gross injustices and abuses which fueled the revolution in the first place. Towards the end of their struggle the FMLN found itself in the denial role trying to convince the Salvadoran people they were not terrorists, rather than presenting themselves as saviors and liberators of the people. Gone were the FMLN war banners of "Tierra y Libertad" [land and freedom].<sup>37</sup> This is not to say that the general populace embraced the government and the military. But they had grown skeptical of the FMLN and weary of the war, and cynical of political maneuvering. The FMLN had lost the support of the masses.

#### Limitations

This research deliberately avoids classified material to encourage maximum distribution of the findings. This is easily accomplished, without affecting the quality of the work, because sizeable unclassified research materials exist which adequately cover the subject.

The research mostly covers the period 1979 to 1984 because this was the key period in which U.S. policy was developed and implemented. After that period the Reagan and

Bush administrations stayed on a fairly stable course of action. The years 1979 to 1984 bracket a key period of stabilization in the course of the 13 year war. After 1984, the ESAF no longer felt they might lose the war, and a long period of more balanced struggle followed.

The research is unable to use face to face interviews as a source due to travel and budget constraints. However, enough interviews are recorded with key personalities of the period to allow extrapolation of key information.

#### Delimitations

Extensive research is coming available as this paper is being written and it must be assumed that it will continue after the research is complete. The study will focus on as much current source material as possible while still relying on contemporary documentation of the period.

## CHAPTER II

### ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

#### The Analogy

Critical to this research is an early understanding of precisely what the Vietnam analogy was. In broad terms the analogy was the notion that Vietnam and El Salvador are significantly linked as an experience. This link provides a center focus for American Foreign policy in El Salvador. The link meant different things to different people. It was often manipulated to influence opinions and policies. At times it meant that Vietnam and El Salvador were linked by both being counterinsurgencies, or by American support of oppressive regimes, or that they were both third world countries used as pawns in the struggle between the superpowers.

#### Comparison of the Countries

El Salvador was conquered and formed, like almost all American countries, as a European colony, gaining independence in the early 19th century, maintaining the language and much of the culture of the mother country. Vietnam's colonial legacy was that of an ancient Asian country with a long established culture and language,

conquered and colonized in the 19th Century by a European power, never totally adopting either the culture or language of the colonizer. Vietnam finally threw off the colonial yoke in the 20th Century after years of violent struggle.

The image of two, tropical, third world countries involved in a communist insurgency affects part of the analogy. However, Vietnam is a large and varied country stretching from the southern tip of Indochina to the Chinese border. It possesses extensive, dense, triple canopy jungles, sparsely inhabited regions as well as densely populated rural and urban areas. It is home to several separate and distinct minority groups and subcultures. El Salvador has no jungles, although some forests remain in the north. It is the most densely populated country in Latin America.<sup>38</sup>

El Salvador has managed to blend Indian and Spanish cultures and has no significant indigenous population nor subcultures. Yet, there were remarkable similarities between El Salvador and Vietnam. Both were third world countries. Both had a colonial past. They both had a Soviet (albeit in El Salvador through the Cubans and Nicaraguans) backed, communist insurgency, using neighboring countries for sanctuary. Both received substantial American aid to bolster seemingly corrupt and questionably democratic regimes. Both had gross disparities between the rich and poor. Both were in tropical regions of the world. The list

of obvious comparisons went on and on. It was easy to think that El Salvador was Vietnam all over again.

#### El Salvador Versus Vietnam

Consider the power of the Vietnam analogy from 1975 to the present. In 1979 the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and subsequent insurgency resulted in the Vietnam analogy being applied to the Soviet dilemma. As recently as the Gulf War (Desert Shield/Desert Storm), Vietnam figured in the national debates as events unfolded and America's leadership chose its course of action. In Somalia the Vietnam analogy was currently used as a talisman to warn America of impending failure. With the prospect of American troops in Bosnia looming on the horizon Vietnam is again touted a warning. The Vietnam analogy is still powerful. But it was doubly so in 1979. In the initial phase of America's involvement with El Salvador's counterinsurgency (1979-1983) rumblings about Vietnam arose in the American public forum. At first, the similarities between the two countries were enough to develop backlash against US commitment to El Salvador. The backlash surfaced in Congressional debate, the press, on campus, and in the streets.

Demonstrations against American policy in El Salvador had the strange appearance of Vietnam anti-war demonstrations. Still not thoroughly understanding the reasons for America's strategic failure in Vietnam,

demonstrators assaulted the Pentagon where they were sure American officers were plotting an ambitious intervention into another third world country. In fact, at the time, the Army's senior leadership was trying to sweep Vietnam under the rug. In the words of V Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Starry, "the Army looked around and realized it should not try to fight that kind of war again elsewhere."<sup>39</sup> On May 4, 1981 the New York Times reported that the previous day over 20,000 people marched on the Pentagon to protest U.S. policy in El Salvador. Also that day the paper reported over 5,000 people held a three hour march in San Francisco against U.S policy in the region.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, five months later the same paper would report that the Pentagon officially opposed use of combat troops in Central America, and that other top officials were skeptical of a military solution.<sup>41</sup>

### The Analogy at Work

#### Analogy Used by the Insurgents

Although the Vietnam analogy was not always drawn from a factual base, and was perhaps inappropriate to the situation in El Salvador, it was used nonetheless in various ways by most of the major participants in the struggle in El Salvador as a justification for their actions. The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) used the Vietnam experience as a part of their political strategy. They knew the Vietnam lesson well. Former FMLN Commander

Miguel Castellanos recalled an interesting meeting he had while in Vietnam to be trained on conducting an insurgency:

Representatives of the [Eastern Bloc] were there. The fear of all of them when they analyzed our [El Salvador's] national situation was that as the war advanced more favorably toward the FMLN, there was more of a probability of intervention on the part of the United States with its combat troops. They asked me what provisions we had made for the situation, and I pointed out that, as in Vietnam, we first had to stop the intervention and then defeat the aggressive attitude of imperialism.

They [the Vietnamese] told us to "take the struggle to the United States, not only take it to the country, but at the political level, take it to the Congress."<sup>42</sup>

The oldest and perhaps most respected FMLN leader of the early years of the insurgency, Cayetano Carpio,<sup>43</sup> also trained with the Vietnamese, proudly became known as the "Ho Chi Minh of Central America."<sup>44</sup> Commander in Chief of the Peoples Revolutionary Army (ERP), Joaquin Villalobos equated the struggle in El Salvador to Vietnam: "if [U.S.] imperialism stubbornly insists on impeding our people from building their own destiny, we are sure that it will suffer a greater defeat than in Vietnam."<sup>45</sup>

The FMLN leadership knew that the key struggle in El Salvador would take place in the public debate in the United States and not on the battlefields of El Salvador. The Vietnam experience taught this lesson particularly well.

#### Analogy Used by the Reagan Administration

Starting off with the initial reluctance of the Carter administration through to the total commitment of the

Reagan and Bush administrations, the American Government was seldom neutral in its position on El Salvador. Reagan chose to make a stand against Soviet influences in El Salvador. With the failure of American military intervention in Vietnam shadowing every action in Central America, Reagan and his team had to step lightly. Often based on assumptions and perceptions rather than hard lessons about success or failure in Vietnam, they chose to walk a thin line between full military intervention and training the El Salvadoran military to do the job themselves. This was a difficult act to perform, and one which made implementation of that policy very delicate. In many ways the Reagan Administration saw in El Salvador a chance to do Vietnam over again--the way it should have been done. It was a way to correct a past mistake. The New York Times stated,

Secretary of State Haig has also dismissed the Vietnam Metaphor, saying that El Salvador, unlike Vietnam, is an area truly vital to U.S. National Security, and that "we are going to succeed, and not flounder as we did in Vietnam."<sup>46</sup>

#### Analogy Used by the American Left

There was perhaps no group in America dedicated more to an abandonment of U.S. involvement in El Salvador than the American left. Early in the war years there was a residue of leftist fervor remaining from the Vietnam war. While opposition to American involvement in El Salvador never reached Vietnam War levels, significant evidence of opposition did exist.



The American left saw America's Vietnam experience as a tool to manipulate public opinion and defeat the Reagan administration's policies by building public outrage against our commitment to El Salvador. This tactic was not necessarily based on any solid evidence linking El Salvador to Vietnam but rather on gut level, emotional appeals, derived from the similarities of images of two, third world countries at war. Journalist Peter Shiras provides the following 1981 example:

Refugees who have fled their homes in the countryside report the use of tactics reminiscent of the Vietnam era. These include the burning of crops and houses, search and destroy missions, and the use of helicopter gunships to "pacify" zones suspected of harboring guerrilla organizations. An October 24 New York Times article states, "Guerrilla spokesman said that United States military advisors were taking part in the offensive, which has involved the use of incendiary bombs and napalm against rural hamlets."

In El Salvador today, a reign of terror exists that can only be compared to Vietnam in its brutality and intensity.<sup>47</sup>

In an influential work from the early years (1981) of the war El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War editors Marvin E. Gettleman, Patrick Lacefield, Louis Menashe, David Mermelstein, and Ronald Radosh clearly stated their opposition to further U.S. involvement and devoted an entire chapter to "The Legacy of Vietnam."<sup>48</sup> They found many parallels between Vietnam and El Salvador:

Has the specter of Vietnam come back to haunt us in the small Central American republic of El Salvador?...There is a familiar ring to what is going on in El Salvador: military advisers have

been sent but never--of course--to go out on combat missions; Roy Prosterman is with us once again, engineering a "land to the tiller" reform; a White Paper shows aggression from the east (Cuba)--in Vietnam it was from the north....There are massacres to rival My Lai; questionable body counts; zones of control where guerrillas melt away only to return again after government soldiers leave....Once again there are search-and -destroy missions, refugees, and reports of napalm and guerilla tunnels. One can almost hear the dominoes falling."

#### Analogy as Seen by the American Public

In the early stages of American involvement in El Salvador, the general public focused on a few key words and phrases which brought the specter of Vietnam to life. Letters to the editor flooded the nation's newspapers, inevitably linking El Salvador to Vietnam. Some of the letters were highly informative, with the occasional gem from someone in authority. Others were emotional reactions to events. If they contained incorrect perceptions or historical inaccuracies, they were valuable nonetheless for they showed the public mood. The term "U.S. military advisor" seemed to be the trigger words which conjured up the ghosts of Vietnam. One typical letter to the Washington Post reads:

It is time for us to balance the Vietnam ledger. We must enter as assets the lessons learned from this painful experience. Having survived a year in the jungles of Vietnam, I shudder as I read accounts of U.S. advisers in El Salvador. We must not be lulled into believing that a few dozen or even a few thousand advisers will necessarily secure El Salvador. If the line has to be drawn in that tiny country, we must be prepared to pay the price. We drew the line in Vietnam, but it was a dotted line. We must learn from our

bitter failures. Our sons and daughters deserve nothing less.<sup>50</sup>

### Analogy Used by the American Military

It was, in fact, the deployment of military advisors (later officially called trainers to avoid deliberate image links with Vietnam) which was one of the clear uses of the Vietnam analogy. The advisor roles in Vietnam and El Salvador were almost identical with the notable exception of the prohibition of advisors in El Salvador from participating in combat operations. A former El Salvador advisor, who served in both wars, says:

I looked at the monthly reports from the OPATT [advisor] in the 4th ESAF [El Salvador Armed Forces] from last year, and then I looked at my old reports from Vietnam in 1970. If I changed the names, dates, and locations, the situations would be almost identical.<sup>51</sup>

### The Policy

Essentially, both the Carter and Reagan administrations followed three, basic, foreign policy tenets in El Salvador. An understanding of these tenets is critical to the organization of the research because each group, pro and con, referred to specific American foreign policies in their arguments. Benjamin C. Schwarz in his comprehensive RAND study American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador identified the United States' three major goals and subsequent policy for fighting the counterinsurgency as: "the reform of the Salvadoran armed

forces, land redistribution, and democratization."<sup>52</sup> The specific policy issues addressed in this research are listed as military reform, economic reform and political reform.

### Military Reform

In discussing the Vietnam analogy and its impact on policy we must include under Schwarz's counterinsurgency goal "reform of Salvadoran armed forces"<sup>53</sup> the arguments ranging from the use of U.S. troops in the war (in whatever capacity), i.e., advisors, direct intervention, escalation of troop presence as in Vietnam, and finally military aid, such as arms, equipment, training for the El Salvador Armed Forces (ESAF). It is important to make the distinction because much of the debate split over levels of American commitment.

Military reform also included reform of the para-military security forces. Essential to both the Carter and Reagan administrations was the belief that the armed forces and the security forces were responsible for much of the oppression that became a part of everyday Salvadoran life in the 1970s and 1980s. The armed forces were seen to be implicated in most of the civilian deaths occurring in the country including the deaths of some American citizens, the most notable of which was the murder of four American churchwomen in 1980.<sup>54</sup>

Many members of the U.S. Military Group (USMILGRP) in El Salvador felt that their primary mission was the

professionalization of the Salvadoran military.<sup>55</sup> If this mission was accomplished correctly then all other missions (i.e. winning the war, reducing the abuses, winning hearts and minds) would follow in its wake. Professionalization was perhaps best defined by Colonel James J. Steele, MILGRP Commander from 1984 to 1986. He states:

When I say professionalize or assist them in professionalization, that's not an easy task to define or to accomplish if you look at the history of this military and its involvement in politics.. When we say professionalize, I'm talking about developing, within the military, the respect for the human rights of its citizens, to help and protect the democratic process, and so on.<sup>56</sup>

Opponents of U.S. commitment in the region saw the Salvadoran military and our support of it as the problem and the elimination of American support as the answer. Senator Edward Kennedy stated in a Senate hearing on policy in El Salvador,

Increased U.S. military involvement endangers the remaining hopes for negotiated settlement that many of our Latin American and Western allies have been urging.<sup>57</sup>

As such, much of the military aid given to El Salvador was held in abeyance by Congress until certain legal actions could be taken to bring alleged military criminal suspects to justice. Inevitably, some of the aid would be allowed while a portion was withheld, in a "carrot and stick"<sup>58</sup> inducement designed to pressure the armed forces to reform themselves and purge themselves of criminal elements. At every review of military aid to El Salvador,

an analysis of progress towards this aim of reform was presented by the administration to Congress to gain release of funds to the Salvadorans. Progress in military reform was always slow by anyone's measure but both the Carter and Reagan administrations managed to get the funds released, at least in part, to keep the armed forces alive long enough to reform themselves. It is critical to understand the importance of military reform because much of the argument against U.S. involvement in El Salvador came in the form of opposition to military assistance.

#### Economic Reform

Economic reform covered a large part of the American effort, such as debt control, infrastructure support, and special economic projects by the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID). However, the key part of economic reform which Schwarz identifies was "land redistribution"<sup>59</sup> or more simply land reform. Schwarz notes:

The United States pushed land reform so vigorously as an essential part of the counterinsurgency program because it recognized that it was impossible for the Salvadoran regime to win legitimacy unless the land tenure system, which was at the root of the basic inequities of Salvadoran policy, was altered.<sup>60</sup>

Much of the perceived injustice of Salvadoran society and, in fact, much of the FMLN's political platform

was tied to land reform. The need for reform was obvious.

Schwarz pointed out:

Over 70 percent of the land was owned by only 1 percent of the population, while over 40 percent of the rural population owned no land at all and worked as sharecroppers on absentee owners' land or as laborers on large estates.<sup>61</sup>

In a third world country, where the two largest exports were agricultural products (coffee and cotton), such estrangement of the people from the land became a focal point for all that was wrong about the Salvadoran society. While the United States considered land reform one of the keys to success in El Salvador, it was also the reform most resisted by the Salvadoran ruling class. It perhaps caused more friction and reactive violence than even political and military reform because it struck at the heart of the oligarchy's power--land. Schwarz writes,

It is a measure of the obstacles that have confronted the initial promise of reform in El Salvador that most of those Salvadorans in the Christian-Democratic reformist military junta, who began the program have been killed, exiled, or have joined the rebel movement.... The number of peasants killed by security forces in 1980 was highest in those areas affected by [Land Reform's] Phase I; over 500 peasant leaders, dozens of land reform officials, and hundreds of peasant union and cooperative members were assassinated.<sup>62</sup>

From the earliest commitments of both the Carter and Reagan administrations, economic aid was given precedence over military aid. This was in part an effort to thwart comparisons between Vietnam and El Salvador. A State Department press release from May 12, 1981, titled "Some

Differences Between U.S. Involvement in Vietnam and El Salvador," states clearly that, "Unlike our aid to Vietnam, the major emphasis of our assistance program for El Salvador is economic rather than military." <sup>63</sup>

There was little debate in America over the need for land reform. As mentioned, the oligarchy (essentially the land owners) was not happy about the possibility of land reform. But there were segments of Salvadoran society, other than the communist insurgents, who were ready to admit that land reform was needed. The new military-civilian junta of 1979 included land reform as a key component of those reforms necessary to head off a communist revolution. According to Schwarz,

Agrarian reform, then, was an attempt to instill in the populace a belief in the governing regime's willingness and ability to produce positive change. Given a stake in the system, it was believed, the peasants would be far less inclined to join a revolutionary movement.<sup>64</sup>

The reform proposed was radical enough. American Ambassador Robert White described it as "the most revolutionary land reform in Latin American History."<sup>65</sup>

In El Salvador, land reform was considered key to transforming Salvadoran society. It would largely be an American effort. Schwarz concludes that land reform in El Salvador was entirely a U.S. project:

El Salvador's land redistribution program, designed by American experts, financed by American economic aid, and largely implemented by American organizers and technicians, has been, along with America's attempt to improve the armed



forces respect for human rights, the heart of the U.S. effort to transform the conditions that motivate the insurgency."

Other than the introduction of American military advisors and the increased U.S. military aid, perhaps no other program brought a closer comparison between Vietnam and El Salvador than land reform. It was an accurate comparison. Phase III of El Salvador's land reform program, "Land-to-the-Tiller," was largely influenced by the same man who designed Vietnam's land reform policy--Dr. Roy Prosterman.

Peter Shiras, in his testimony before the House of Representative March 5 & 11, 1981, hearings on "U.S. Policy Towards El Salvador" clearly outlines this link:

The substance of El Salvador's Land-to-the-Tiller program is practically the same as its Vietnamese forerunner. Not only are the general guidelines of the two programs identical, but even the form of landlord compensation, in both cash and bonds, and the emphasis put on landlord compensation are the same in both instances. Even the claims made for the two reforms sound alike. A 1970 New York Times article referred to Vietnam's land reform as "probably the most ambitious and progressive, non-communist land reform of the twentieth century." William Bowdler, Carter's Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, describes El Salvador's land reform as "one of the most significant such efforts in the hemisphere," while the reforms shadow author, Roy Prosterman, describes it as "the most sweeping agrarian reform in the history of Latin America." The transplanting of the Vietnam program to El Salvador is undoubtedly the work of Dr. Prosterman."

## Political Reform

Schwarz's third policy focus "democratization"<sup>68</sup>, or rather political reform, was considered necessary not only to end the insurgency in El Salvador, but remove its causes. At the heart of democratization was the American foreign policy, first outlined by President Carter, as concern for human rights. It was also at the heart of what made America different from her adversaries in the Cold War. Criticism from opponents of American involvement in El Salvador consistently pointed to the lack of democracy in El Salvador as a reason to abandon support to that nation, and proponents of American policy used it as a justification for involvement.

It was felt that political reform would give the impression of moral legitimacy needed to defeat the counterinsurgency. Many felt we had not accomplished that in Vietnam and that this had contributed to the failure there. Lieutenant Colonel John Fishel and Major Edmund S. Cowan, then of the USSOUTHCOM staff related,

Insurgencies and revolutionary wars are wars for moral legitimacy. By this is meant the popular perception of relative moral rightness of the competing forces. Nations whose governments have achieved moral legitimacy are relatively invulnerable to insurgent movements. By contrast, a nation whose government is perceived as lacking in moral rightness is a prime target for communist insurgents and their moral egalitarian doctrine.<sup>69</sup>

Political reform tended to center around three issues: democratization, human rights, and judicial reform.

The Carter administration initiated a respect for human rights as a cornerstone of foreign policy. In essence, the Carter administration used the "idealist" approach to human rights while the Reagan administration used the "realist" approach. Political Scientist Erwin C. Hargrove explains the Carter approach:

In Keeping Faith Carter argues that American foreign policy should be based on the democratic idealism of Jefferson and Wilson. Idealism, he contends, is more practical than realism and provides the strongest basis for American power and influence in the world. He wanted human rights to be "a central theme for American foreign policy" because it was time for us to capture the imagination of the world again. "As President I hoped and believed that the expansion of Human rights might be the wave of the future throughout the world."<sup>70</sup>

Reagan, on the other hand saw the east-west struggle as paramount and put human rights in a more focused light.

A. Glenn Mower, Jr., offers this example:

While the Reagan administration's placing human rights within a geopolitical context is open to various interpretations, there can be no doubt that in this administration's eyes, "there is symmetry between promoting the geopolitical interest of the United States and promoting human rights," and that to Reagan, "the Soviet Union is the overriding issue...."<sup>71</sup>

### The Great Debate

#### Introduction

The forces at work during the period of America's involvement in El Salvador battled in a highly charged atmosphere. The emotional nature of the battle was probably due more to the Vietnam analogy than any single contributing

factor. Vietnam made every American participant wary--both the opposition and supporters. It is essential that this argument be analyzed and measured against the backdrop of policy issues: military reform, economic reform and political reform. The argument naturally lends itself to two opposing camps--supporters and opponents.

### The Opposition's Argument

#### Opposition from the Government

The architects and proponents of American policy in El Salvador had to walk a narrow path. Whatever policy America followed in El Salvador it had to appear as though the U.S. was in complete control of the situation and could extract itself at the time of its choosing.

Perhaps understanding the sensitivity of American involvement, with Vietnam viewed as a bottomless pit of U.S. commitment, the American public was wary of El Salvador. To directly fight the counterinsurgency, America chose the middle path of Foreign Internal Defense (FID) rather than U.S. military intervention. The Reagan and Bush administrations also realized that they needed to attack the underlying causes of the revolution. They understood that military actions served only to buy time for social and political reforms to take root.

Congress was presented with an interesting situation in El Salvador. Polls clearly showed that the American

public was largely uninformed on the complex El Salvador issues. Steffen W. Schmidt explains:

Members of the U.S. Congress have taken notice of the mood among their constituents. This has allowed them, on one hand to use their own judgement and vote their conscience so to speak, because a considerable proportion of the voters back home are neither informed nor have an opinion on the El Salvador issue. On the other hand, it resulted in a very cautious congressional position concerning U.S. aid.<sup>72</sup>

As ambitious as the government's programs appeared, the Congress, reacting to public outcry and its own inability to control events during Vietnam, put numerous qualifiers and restrictions on U.S. aid to El Salvador. The U.S. administration found itself repeatedly having to defend policies in the region. Congress was well aware that the key to aid to El Salvador was money and they controlled the purse. Therefore, they tied aid to various qualifiers--such as investigation and prosecution of the murderers of the four American churchwomen in 1980--to force the administration to show that the Salvadoran government was making progress in areas of reform.

Such restrictions made the administration increasingly defensive. This clash of interests provided a very accurate picture of the struggle to support El Salvador and its opposition.

In 1981, two hearings were held specifically to review policy and progress in El Salvador. The first hearing before the House of Representatives Subcommittee on

Inter-American Affairs of the Committee of Foreign Affairs was U.S. Policy Toward El Salvador. The opposition included members of the House, Representative Barbara Mikulski, members of the Senate, Senator Edward M. Kennedy and reports from American and Salvadoran Church groups and other independent groups such as Amnesty International.

Representative Mikulski, a consistent opponent of U.S. policies in the region, quickly used the Vietnam analogy to make her point on the foolishness of continued U.S. involvement in the affairs of El Salvador. Particularly damning was an article she submitted for the record from the Baltimore Sun titled, "An American Tragedy-- Repeating the Mistakes of Vietnam and Iran."<sup>73</sup> She outlined the argument that U.S. involvement, by its implied similarities to Vietnam and Iran will, de facto, cause the U.S. to fail in El Salvador. Rep. Mikulski cited her recent trip to Central America (she did not visit El Salvador) as ample background for forming her strong opposition.

Most of the horror stories she related were from second hand information told to her by people who obviously had a strong bias against an American involvement in the region. Her trip had been sponsored by Unitarian Universalist Service Committee of the Unitarian Church--a strong opponent to U.S. policy in the region. She launched into emotional tirades, with particular vindictiveness against the U.S. Department of State, "I could have been

killed . . . because [of the carelessness] of the State Department."74

Curiously enough, while wholeheartedly using the Vietnam analogy she accused the State department of using false analogies to turn her away from the facts of the situation. She stated:

Some of the techniques State employed were half truths, steering us only to people who supported the official position and using "buzz words," (e.g, "another Cuba" as an inaccurate description of Nicaragua, another "Pol Pot-Cambodia" as a false description of El Salvador and its refugees).75

She went on to describe how the State Department continually deceived her and how her own investigations revealed the intense repression and violence committed against the people of El Salvador by its security forces and the armed forces. She described in gory detail the mutilation, rape, and killing and concluded shortly thereafter with her summary:

So here the United States is in Central America repeating the mistakes of Vietnam and Iran. Once again some of its officials are lying about terrorism and exploitation that the United States supports and help pays for.76

Her argument summed up well the emotional impact felt in the American left and by Congressional opponents of U.S. policy in El Salvador. The very image of brutality was sufficient to compare it to our failure in Vietnam and therefore because we failed in Vietnam we would likewise fail in El Salvador. Brutality existed in Vietnam. Vietnam

equaled failure. Therefore brutality in El Salvador equaled failure.

Senator Kennedy used more cogent opposition. Similarly he condemned the violence and repression. But he mainly chose to condemn the administration's military support to El Salvador. He carefully avoided the mention of Vietnam but the analogy was clearly apparent just beneath the surface:

U.S. military aid to El Salvador has been extended to include military armaments . . . Major new weapons supplied to the security forces and the military-civilian junta now are being proposed by the Reagan Administration. Some twenty American military advisors are engaged in both training the direction of the counterinsurgency campaign and increasing numbers of advisors are being proposed.

The consequences of a deeper U.S. military commitment cannot be ignored. There is a grave risk that more American personnel will be committed--and that more American lives will be lost. Then we may find ourselves on the precipice of a full scale military intervention."

While using the example of further military aid as the sure road to full military actions in El Salvador (as in Vietnam), Kennedy saw stopping the violence as a political solution. He clearly wished to eliminate one of the administration's three key policies--reform of the Salvadoran military. He was convinced that this is purely a political crisis. He stated:

This is essentially a political crisis with a broad opposition of Christian and Social Democrats, labor and religious leaders, as well as the far left including Communists in that country."



He suggested that getting all these diverse groups to sit down together would produce a solution. However, he excluded the one group that American policy makers deemed key to the whole crisis--the Salvadoran military.

Some opponents to U.S. policy saw land reform as the best example of that policy's failure. Journalist Peter Shiras, in an article from "Food Monitor" in 1981 stated:

In El Salvador, as in Vietnam, the U.S. finds itself supporting a regime that lacks popular support and is fighting a largely rural based guerrilla movement that enjoys the wide support of the peasantry...the U.S. response has been a coordinated program of rural pacification and counterinsurgency, with land reform playing a critical role."

#### Opposition from the Media

One of the most vocal opponents of U.S. Policy in El Salvador was the media. (This research reviewed print media as well as photo and electronic journalism.) It was hard to pinpoint the exact reason for such a strong opposition. The media's role had changed significantly during , and perhaps because of the Vietnam war. The immediacy of television brought the day to day realities into the American household as never before. It was a well documented that the famous Tet offensive, a decisive defeat for the Viet Cong, was perceived as a communist victory by the American public because of media presentations. It appeared that what was denied to the Vietnamese communists on the field of battle was handed to them by the American media. To be sure, others in the U.S. administration of the

Vietnam era, as well as the military, took some of the blame for why the media turned public will against the war. Regardless of the reasons, the coverage of the Vietnam war would now influence the media's coverage of the war in El Salvador. One noticeable change would be that now satellite communications and the facsimile machine (FAX) would be readily accessible to the press and help increase the real time coverage of the war. The electronic press grabbed the violence and shocking images of Central America and projected them into the living rooms of America. Serious reflective journalism in periodicals and in some of the more prestigious newspapers such as the New York Times and the Washington Post, carefully analyzed the situation in EL Salvador and actively contributed to the opposition. Once again the Vietnam analogy would come into play.

One of the most damning indictments of America's involvement in El Salvador would come from a well written journalistic collection of articles taken from periodicals and newspapers titled El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War. This collection used a variety of writers, to include government sources to build a strong case against U.S. involvement in El Salvador. The editors, Marvin E. Gettleman, Patrick Lacefield, Louis Menashe, David Mermelstein and Ronald Radosh, made no excuses about their reasons for building this case. The Vietnam analogy played a big part in it. The editors stated in their introduction:

Motivated by a conviction of the need to learn from history, and to do what we can to prevent U.S. power from being enlisted on the side of an oppressive antipopular force in El Salvador (in short, to prevent the transformation of El Salvador into another Vietnam), the editors of this book pretend no agnostic impartiality, and do not attempt to present any mechanical balancing of readings on various "sides" of the questions.<sup>80</sup>

The editors seemed to equate the East-West, Cold War confrontation as the reason that Vietnam equaled El Salvador. They asserted that just when Americans thought that they had learned the lessons of Vietnam they started all over again in El Salvador. They wrote:

After an interval when it appeared that the U.S., wiser for the experience of the Vietnam war, was willing to come to terms with the turbulent quest for social and economic justice in the Third World, El Salvador was converted into a flashpoint of the East-West confrontation in a bizarre re-enactment of the old policy of "containment" of Soviet power.<sup>81</sup>

#### Opposition from the American Left

A good example of the flawed logic and contradictory argument of the American left was best expressed in El Salvador: America's Next Vietnam? by Steffen W. Schmidt. From the title, one could assume that the work deals exclusively with the links between El Salvador and Vietnam. But the author, himself an academic like many of the opposition, presented some confusing contradictions. In one instance, he stated that in Congress "the possibility of sending U.S. troops has been categorically turned down."<sup>82</sup> Shortly thereafter he stated "U.S. expectations for and U.S.

policy towards El Salvador seems to be . . . You can't win. You can't even break even. You can't even quit the game."<sup>83</sup>

In essence, Schmidt stated that while Congress continued to hold the reins to keep El Salvador from developing into another massive U.S. intervention like Vietnam, America's policy was somehow out of control.

Despite the title, the Schmidt book actually dealt with the El Salvador/Vietnam analogy in a very circuitous manner. Vietnam links were discussed in only nine pages out of one hundred and ninety two. Most of the rest of the book was given over to inevitable historical background, emotional personal anecdotes from his visits to El Salvador, the obligatory horror stories of murder and repression and a criticism of the Carter and Reagan policies in the Region. However, each discussion had an emotional bias which telegraphed its opposition to American involvement.

Schmidt found it difficult to define the analogy beyond its obvious visual and emotional similarities. He gave no reasons why Vietnam is important to El Salvador beyond the obvious one: that America launched a full scale intervention in Vietnam and lost and repetition of this in El Salvador would cause a similar loss. He seemed to feel that public opinion is the key to the Vietnam analogy, and should impact heavily on policy in El Salvador. He cited various public opinion polls and states:

While it is difficult to estimate the direct impact of American public opinion on U.S. policy

in El Salvador, three points are clear. Americans are not well informed about El Salvador; Americans are influenced by a "Vietnam factor," and Americans are extremely skittish about the use of United States troops."<sup>4</sup>

But he did manage to distill the essence of the left's emotional use of the Vietnam analogy:

Central America has a peculiar familiarity about it. To some, it looks a great deal like Southeast Asia twenty years ago. Domino theorists in Washington began musing that Nicaragua is the area's north Vietnam; El Salvador is the functional equivalent of South Vietnam; Honduras is Cambodia and Laos; and Guatemala is Thailand. For many, names like Cusnahuat, Nejapa, Uluazapa, Cacopera and Metapan (all in El Salvador), sound much like provincial villages in Southeast Asia. In late March, 1981, Vietnam as an analogy even entered reporters' questions of President Reagan...Richard Allen...Alexander Haig. Congressmen and the media also began to talk about "another Vietnam." Even Salvadoran revolutionaries believed that they were the cutting edge of a battle against imperialism in all Central America."<sup>5</sup>

Thus Schmidt gave the traditional argument of the left--that El Salvador had the "eerie look" of Vietnam, and because of American involvement there, it followed that the U.S. was headed down the same road as Vietnam.

Only the U.S. Congress and American public opinion are able to exert sufficient pressure on the present administration to alter its hard line posture. Failing this, the future for El Salvador and Central America darkens. For as of the moment, the United States seems driven upon an unalterable course towards its second Vietnam."<sup>6</sup>

### The Support's Argument

#### Support from the Media

It is difficult to find members of the media who used the Vietnam analogy to support American involvement in

El Salvador. The media tended to fall into the opposition camp or at best into the neutral category. Several journalists, such as James LeMoyné of the New York Times, tried to be objective in their reporting. They seemed to realize that the issues involved were complex and resisted simple explanations. But many others were not as well versed in Central American affairs, often did not speak the language and unfortunately relied on the anti-policy literature which seemed to abound in that period.

Exceptions to the anti-policy bias of the press were to be found, oddly enough in non-American sources. Salvadoran journalists often used the analogy to define the grand strategy they saw for communist takeover in the region. Steffen Schmidt explained:

To that newspaper [El Salvador's "Diario De Hoy"] all of central America and the Caribbean was to be the target of the communists, just as Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia were at the forefront of the struggle in the 1960s and 1970s. To the editorial writers of the "Diario", it was not force of arms which defeated the free world in Vietnam so much as it was internal subversion which paralyzed the West's defenses. The "Diario's" writers concluded with the observation that the Vietnam War was "won by the communists on the pages of 'The New York Times', 'The Washington Post', 'Le Monde', in the classrooms of Harvard university, and on the campus of Kent State University."<sup>87</sup>

Another notable exception to the anti-policy bias was a member of the international press, Frenchman Jean-Louis Clariond. Clariond was an experienced photo journalist and war reporter, having covered Vietnam, two Arab-Israeli conflicts, and numerous wars and revolutions in

Africa." Specifically in Central America, he covered the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua. He came to El Salvador and covered the situation there from the 1979 Coup until June of 1981." In 1981 he published the comprehensive photo essay El Salvador Arde: La Verdad Sobre La Tragedia Salvadorena (El Salvador Blazes: The Truth About the Salvadoran Tragedy). What was truly remarkable about this work is that the author categorically stated that he was certain that the Rebel movement in El Salvador, as well as in Nicaragua, was supported by and manipulated by the forces of International Communism.<sup>90</sup> He covered atrocities by both the rebels and the extreme right, but after following the Salvadoran forces in combat, he seemed to feel that there was a distinction between the extreme right and the military. Clariond realized that the struggle in Central America was essentially a super-power struggle.<sup>91</sup> He suggested that, since the United States was the more benevolent super-power, it should become more involved in the struggle. In his use of the Vietnam analogy, he attributed America's reluctance to become involved in El Salvador to America's failure in Vietnam and fear of the same in Central America. He stated in this rather awkward translation of the original:

If the people of the United States continue to derive satisfaction from their past mistakes, and do not stop crying over their Vietnam wounds, while pronouncing a "mea culpa" that destroys faith, that will be the end of all freedom and of the individual right of self-determination.<sup>92</sup>

Clariond's book was largely a photo essay. His tone was emotional. His greatest flaw was perhaps the emotional development of his argument. But there was no denying the stark impact of his photos. This work was presented in the heat of the earliest part of the war. His sources were all first hand and he traveled extensively with the guerrillas as well as the Salvadoran armed forces in extremely dangerous circumstances to obtain his material. He witnessed extensive instances of both right and left wing atrocities and spoke with the authority of first hand experience.

#### Support from the Government

Obviously one can expect the administration to defend its own policies in Central America. Sometimes the arguments were well laid out and at other times they appeared as an "apologia" for its policies. In many cases the administration sought to de-emphasize the Vietnam analogy, perhaps sensing its power to influence the support of policies in El Salvador.

Of course, the government's Chief Executive, Ronald Reagan, spent much of his energy trying to convince others that he had a sound policy in El Salvador. Again, he had to deal with the Vietnam analogy's power. He sought to reduce it whenever he could. When queried by Walter Cronkite for CBS News on March 3, 1981, he categorically denied that El Salvador would turn into another Vietnam.<sup>93</sup> He did much to



defuse the rhetoric, including trying to mitigate the powerful effects of the word "advisor":

You used the term military advisers. You know, there's a sort of technicality there. You could say they're advisers in that they're training, but when it's used as adviser, that means military men who go in and accompany the forces into combat, advise on strategy and tactics. We have no one of that kind."

In 1981, the administration also published a White Paper on El Salvador titled "Communist Interference in El Salvador."<sup>5</sup> This paper brought to sharp focus the east-west nature of the conflict and hoped to fit El Salvador into part of the cold war puzzle. However, some saw the White Paper as a close parallel to the Vietnam White Paper of 1965.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the administration had taken an important step towards diluting the Vietnam analogy and putting the conflict in what it perceived as the correct perspective.

William Colby, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and heavily involved in the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) mission in Vietnam, and father of the Vietnam war's famous Operation Phoenix had much to say about neutralizing the link between Vietnam and El Salvador. He felt that Vietnam was not a complete failure for the Americans. In his article in the New York Times on April 20, 1981, he stated that the years 1968 to 1972 had much to teach us in how we should follow our policy in El Salvador in that it,

offers a positive model of a leading role for political, economic and social programs to enlist a nation to develop and defend itself, with American advice and assistance in doing both."

But he dismissed the casual comparison of Vietnam and El Salvador while he recognized its power:

Debate over American action in Central America is dominated by the specter of Vietnam. Some call for a bold stance to exorcise the American defeat there. Some fear that sending the first few advisers will start a certain descent toward a pit of hundreds of thousands of American soldiers locked in...a bloody jungle battle. And some decry the analogy, saying El Salvador and Vietnam have little in common, so that the earlier experience does not augur the result in a new area.

The common measuring stick . . . is an image of Vietnam emanating from the Tet attack of 1968 . . . . With this image, the conditions are inevitable that we should not repeat the experience."

Colby argued sensibly for the use of what we did right in Vietnam and the discard of what we did wrong. With such cogent arguments, he became the administration's most intelligent supporter.

Another convincing supporter of the administration was Jeanne Kirkpatrick. Her arguments presented in Commentary in November 1979 "so impressed Ronald Reagan that he brought her into his cabinet . . . ." She faulted the Carter administration for failing to control the outcome of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. Her warnings were directed at the outbreak of guerrilla warfare in El Salvador as well as the rest of Central America. Referring to the importance of the analogy she stated:

Vietnam taught us that the United States could not serve as the world's policeman; it should also have taught us the dangers of trying to be the world's midwife to democracy when the birth is scheduled to take place under conditions of guerrilla war.<sup>100</sup>

She understood the almost mystical power of the Vietnam analogy and how it had taken on a life of its own. This, she contended was what tied the Carter administration's hands in Nicaragua, as well as Iran. She felt that what the Carter administration learned from the Vietnam lesson was fear of using violence. Kirkpatrick hoped America was at last over this fear which she called the Vietnam syndrome. "We may well be over our Vietnam syndrome, as has been said, and no longer afraid of using force."<sup>101</sup> Her reason for this (and this is critical to her argument) was that Vietnam, after the war, went from being a leftist "cause celebre" to another brutal communist dictatorship, thus breaking the magic of the Vietnam analogy. Quoting Stephen Rosenfeld of the Washington Post, she concluded:

. . . in this [the Reagan] administration's time, Vietnam has been transformed, for much of American public opinion, from a country wronged by the U.S. to one revealing a brutal essence of its own.<sup>102</sup>

Thus she tried to persuade others that we should perhaps not worry so much about what we did wrong in Vietnam if our former adversaries now showed themselves to be simply another communist dictatorship.

## CHAPTER III

### CONCLUSIONS

#### The Impact on Policy

As shown before, the Vietnam analogy was extensively used by almost everyone involved with American policy in El Salvador. The American left used it to interfere with policy. The Carter and Reagan administrations used it to develop policy. Opponents in Congress used it to question or moderate policy. Salvadoran guerrillas used it to try and defeat the policies of an imperialist enemy. The American military used it to help win the war.

The analogy was powerful. As stated by President Carter himself, the period of distrust and lack of confidence that characterized his era, was a by-product of the American defeat in Indochina.<sup>103</sup> Reagan's decision to make a firm commitment, and undercut the causes of the insurgency in El Salvador were likewise affected by America's Vietnam experience--a wish to "to succeed, and not flounder as we did in Vietnam."<sup>104</sup>

This research has shown how the analogy was applied to the three areas of reform: military, political, and economic. It deeply influenced each area. Therefore, the

analogy must be taken into consideration when reviewing the success of the American effort in El Salvador.

But was the American effort successful in El Salvador and if so to what extent? And if it was successful then surely the application of the Vietnam analogy contributed to that effort.

At the immediate conclusion of the peace accords officials on both sides were to carefully avoid claiming victory. ARENA Party Chairman, Calderon Sol, denied it represented a rebel victory. "It is the Salvadoran people who are the great victors of the end to this tragic chapter in our history."<sup>105</sup> The New York Times editorial page from the day after the peace accord heralds "Who Won in Salvador? Everyone."<sup>106</sup>

But was this an even draw? Could it be that American policy in the region prevented dialogue rather than encouraged it? Was the war's negotiated end a result of external forces, such as the collapse of international communism, U.S. congressional opposition to further funding of the war, and military stalemate, rather than success of American policy? An article which seems to sum up this negative viewpoint is Terry Lynn Karl's "El Salvador's Negotiated Revolution" published in the prestigious journal Foreign Affairs in the Spring of 1992. In his article he concludes that the Reagan and Bush administrations deliberately blocked negotiations, thereby unnecessarily

prolonging the war. Only when the end of the Cold War changed the balance, he claims, were the American and Salvadoran governments forced into negotiations.

For example, he claims that good opportunities for a negotiated settlement existed when both France and Mexico called for negotiations between the warring parties as early as 1981.<sup>107</sup> What he fails to mention is that in 1981 the government of El Salvador and the newly formed guerrilla alliance of the FMLN were locked in mortal combat. Each side was convinced of the need for a military victory. Until 1984, the FMLN perhaps still had the option of a military victory. The aims of both sides were so extreme at that point that a negotiated settlement could only be worked out if one or the other capitulated. Manwaring and Prisk clearly show FMLN intentions of the period,

As time progressed from the "Final Offensive" [1981] through the end of 1984, it became more and more evident that the insurgent organizations were not interested in reforming the Salvadoran society. Indeed, reform appears to be no more than a pretext to rally support both internally and externally. After reforms were, in fact, initiated by the government, the real objective of the "revolutionaries" became obvious--take power. In October 1982, the FMLN began a prolonged, nearly constant offensive.<sup>108</sup>

Almost all the FMLN commanders realized that the road to power was through armed conflict rather than negotiation. They felt that reform was, as mentioned above, "a pretext to rally support." A captured FMLN document from 1983 clearly states that it recognizes the impact of

"favorable political strategic conditions which will multiply the impact of the military advance."<sup>109</sup> In other words, the political struggle serves as a force multiplier for the military struggle.

As early as 1980, Juan Chacon, member of the executive committee of the marxist Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), stated that "The democratic and mass organizations realized there was only one road to victory: that of armed struggle and use of the people's method of combat."<sup>110</sup>

In 1982, Joaquin Villalobos, Commander-in-Chief of the Peoples Revolutionary Army (ERP), and key military leader in the FMLN alliance, noted the shift in strategic objectives from conducting a war of annihilation to a war of attrition. He stated that the aim now was to "push the [government] Army to the point where its morale would collapse."<sup>111</sup> His plan did not include negotiations. Rather he spoke of the battle in both strategic and tactical terms, using,

First, actions of strategic annihilation wherever possible. Second, destabilizing the country through sabotage, fundamentally against transportation, power lines, telephone lines, fuel. Third, harassment ambushes and annihilation of minor positions.<sup>112</sup>

On the other side, the Armed Forces of El Salvador [ESAF] were not against negotiations but rather felt that the rebels refused to negotiate in earnest. Perhaps a historical Marxist reputation of using negotiations as a

tool for gaining the upper hand contributed to this.

Colonel Carlos Reynaldo Lopez Nuila, Vice Minister of Public Security for El Salvador in 1984 certainly felt that way.

We must always bear in mind that we are confronted by the Marxists, and the Marxists have their own moral standards . . . The Marxist moral states that one must utilize whatever the means in order to achieve power. It somewhat reflects the morals of Machiavelli. What is important is objectives. What is important is the power, and then, it doesn't matter what mechanisms are used in order to achieve this power. As a result, the use of negotiations and dialogue is just another mechanism of war. It is just another instrument of the conflict.<sup>113</sup>

The guerrillas continued to manipulate the negotiation process to gain their political aims right up to the end of the peace accords in 1992. The New York Times reported:

The excruciating difficulty of the negotiations stemmed in large part from the fact that they became a forum in which the rebels sought many of the political changes that they had failed to win on the battlefield.<sup>114</sup>

Karl's basic hypothesis that the United States interfered or blocked the negotiation process does not hold water. The United States encouraged negotiations by trying to build up the military and establish a democratic atmosphere so that the Salvadoran government could negotiate from a position of strength. Colonel Lyman C. Duryea, U.S. Defense Attache in El Salvador, 1983 to 1985, explains the American position,

We determined that we were going to improve the capabilities of the Salvadoran military to the point where they could hold their own, and we



did that. But we defined as our objective ultimately--and both on the political and military sides--obliging the President [of El Salvador], or encouraging the President and applying pressure across the board, to offer a dialogue to the insurgents. Then, on the military side, we intended that the Salvadoran military continue to apply sufficient pressure to force the insurgents to the negotiating table.<sup>115</sup>

Additionally, the administration, consistent with the Kissinger Commission recommendations, listed "achievement of a diplomatic settlement" as one of its three political goals.<sup>116</sup>

The Salvadoran government promoted dialogue leading to a negotiated settlement from an early date. In October to November 1984, the GOES, headed by its new, democratically elected President, Jose Napoleon Duarte felt that the minimal conditions were in place to commence dialogue with the Guerrillas.<sup>117</sup> Duarte's problem was that he found the FMLN oddly opposed to sincere dialogue or negotiation. Furthermore, the FMLN leadership appeared divided over the issue. For example, simple, cease-fire agreements later hammered out by Duarte with FMLN Commander Cienfuegos, were undermined by FMLN Commander Villalobos.<sup>118</sup> Duarte then decided he needed to accurately divine FMLN intentions.

To see how the Guerrillas were thinking, I took advantage of a forum in Los Angeles provided by an academic group that wanted to stage a debate between the government and the Guerrillas. I decided to send [Minister of the Presidency] Ray Prendes and a team with instructions to raise certain points in the debate and see how the FMLN reacted. Afterward,

we analyzed their responses carefully. We found that the Guerrillas had more interest in a truce as a propaganda device than as a serious step toward a solution. We realized that they would not seriously consider a cease-fire, so we reduced our next proposal. We would ask for a limited Christmas truce and humanitarian measures.<sup>119</sup>

Thus, the idea that negotiations were "forced" on the Salvadoran government was simply not true. Rather, it was the FMLN who had to be dragged to the negotiation table. The drying up of the FMLN's external support due to related events in the Soviet Bloc (to include Cuba), and the stunning defeat of the Sandinistas at the polls in Nicaragua, coupled with their failed offensive of November 1989, probably contributed to their belated decision to negotiate in earnest.

It could be considered that it was the consistency of American support, a broadening of political life in El Salvador, and the ESAF's staunch refusal to buckle under which contributed, among other things, to the inevitability of a peace treaty. Because of the FMLN's vanishing external support, and a military victory completely out of their grasp, they certainly must have realized that they had no choice but to negotiate.

To be sure, the Salvadoran Government was under pressure to negotiate by the Americans, but this had always been the case. Both Duarte and the new President Alfredo Cristiani had stated from the outset that they wanted negotiations.<sup>120</sup> Most likely, it was Cristiani's ability to

control the cruder rightist tendencies of his own ARENA party, convince the military of the need to accept change, and wrangle a workable solution from the FMLN which contributed to peace more than American pressure.

America continued on relatively the same policy paths for thirteen years. This showed that America was committed for the long haul. Although started by a Democratic administration, America's commitment benefitted by the continuity of twelve years of solidly Republican administrations. But the fact that America stayed on this difficult and expensive course showed American resolve not let its ally down.

The American counterinsurgency effort in El Salvador can, therefore, be considered the great American success story. America's consistent support, both moral and material plus carefully devised policies, modified and adjusted, as this research has shown, by the Vietnam analogy allowed this miracle of the peace to come about. Some specific American policy successes are outlined below.

#### The Success of Military Reform

It would seem that military reform has always been the key reform. Obviously, the Salvadoran military was seen by the American government as one of problems in combating the insurgency rather than one of the solutions. Recognizing the potential of the Salvadoran military to transform society by transforming itself, American military

aid was contingent on reform in political arena. The Kissinger Commission,

recommended that increased military aid to El Salvador be contingent upon the Salvadoran government's demonstrated progress toward free elections; freedom of association; the establishment of the rule of law and an effective judicial system; and the termination of the so-called death squads, as well as vigorous action against those guilty of crimes and the persecution to the extent possible of past offenders.<sup>121</sup>

America's commitment to a policy of Foreign Internal Defense (FID) rather than massive U.S. military intervention shows, as Schwarz states, that "the apparent lessons of the Vietnam War have informed present counterinsurgency doctrine."<sup>122</sup> The American military was perhaps the first segment of the government to realize this. Schwarz points out that,

The American military learned this lesson from Vietnam and (at least outwardly) embraced the idea, advocated by many of the best analysts and its own Special Forces during the war, that support of the indigenous population was crucial to success in counterinsurgency. That support could only be won through a combination of economic, psychological, political, and military operations, with military actions in fact subordinate to political actions.<sup>123</sup>

Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam era, Robert McNamara, seemed to realize that during Vietnam "This important war must be fought and won by the Vietnamese themselves." However, it was not until another insurgency surfaced in El Salvador that FID would allow true application of that principle.

To insure compliance in El Salvador with the spirit of FID, advisors were trained, as during the Vietnam War, in cultural and linguistic skills.<sup>124</sup> In a complete diversion from their role in Vietnam, U.S. advisors were strictly forbidden from participating in combat operations. Among other reasons, this would avoid the ugly business of having to explain to the American people why American servicemen were dying in Central America. Probably due to the no-combat rule, only one U.S. advisor was killed under actual combat conditions.<sup>125</sup>

In El Salvador, in the area of military reform policy, the number of advisors was severely circumscribed to keep U.S. troop participation at an absolute minimum. This was perhaps done to show that America was not going down the same road of endless and massive intervention. The size of American troop commitment was also dictated by formal agreement with the GOES. Regardless, the U.S. never pushed hard for expansion of the number of advisors. American military leaders also saw the wisdom of a small, manageable commitment. General John R. Galvin, former Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) stated that,

Our military did not go out and fight. They didn't go lower than Brigade level. And this was good. The Salvadorans could always maintain their pride. They were not puppets. They were not somebody who had to have an advisor following them along in every military combat, telling them what to do.<sup>126</sup>

But the U.S. felt they must live with a small troop presence to ensure continued Congressional support. Former U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, Thomas Pickering stated that this was a "limitation we imposed on ourselves, in order to gain congressional confidence in our approach, on the number of U.S. people we had."<sup>127</sup>

One could argue the levels of success achieved in transforming the Salvadoran armed forces (ESAF). LTC R.A. Rail in his book, El Salvador Advisor: Toward a Military Personnel Advisory Doctrine, claims that, at the tactical level, the advisory mission was a failure,

After a decade of our advice the Salvadoran Army (ESAF) still isn't where it should be in terms of professional ability. A simple example makes the point: ESAF seldom employs artillery in its war with the FMLN, from fear of the accuracy of its own gunners. Ten years of US military advice has not succeeded in teaching such a fundamental component of modern warfare as the use of artillery.<sup>128</sup>

But even LTC Rail admits that the Salvadorans were responsible for many of their own tactical shortcomings.<sup>129</sup> But training gunners was not at the heart of the American mission. There was always the strategic mission of transforming the Salvadoran military from the perceived image of thugs, to the image of hardened professionals, in full support of a constitutional democracy.

Colonel James J. Steele, former MILGRP commander, states that the Americans were there to "professionalize"<sup>130</sup> the Salvadoran military. While he feels that it was too

early (in 1986) to tell the complete story, he states nonetheless that,

If you look at...how you're doing on professionalizing the military, look at the way it's performed in the last elections, say, presidential elections in '84 or the assembly elections in '85.<sup>131</sup>

Add to that the ESAF performance in the elections of 1988 and 1989 and you have an impressive picture of a military leadership which has bought into the idea of free, multi-party elections, and continuation of the democratic process. This is certainly a different outcome than Vietnam.

Leftist opponents in the United States and El Salvador, Church groups, congressional opponents and scores of others accused the armed forces of human rights abuses to include the operation of infamous death squads. If this was true, then opponents to abuse must also credit the ESAF with the dramatic reduction of abuses. U.S. Department of State sources show a steady, and dramatic decline of civilian political deaths from a high of close to 800 per month in 1980 to low of less than 50 per month from 1985 on.<sup>132</sup> Surprisingly, even the FMLN acknowledged the reduction of the death squads. Referring to an opening of Salvadoran political life in 1992, FMLN Commander Roberto Roca refers to the contrast with 1980 when "Then, the death squads were in full operation."<sup>133</sup>

Of course, the American trainers share much of the credit for this. As shown previously, the U.S. government

consistently promoted human rights. U.S. military personnel in El Salvador were consistently told to attempt to prevent abuses and to report all cases of abuse.<sup>134</sup> America showed her commitment to reducing human rights abuses and ESAF responded.

#### The Success of Political Reform

In viewing the success of political reform one must look at the success of the electoral process. El Salvador's history does not lend itself to a standing tradition of democracy. Yet in the period characterized by intense U.S. commitment there were four major elections, each of which "was considered honest and led to peaceful transfer of power."<sup>135</sup>

The Salvadoran people's personal commitment to the process is evidenced by their impressive turnout at the polls despite threats and violence from the FMLN.<sup>136</sup> At some voting stations, violence was so intense that voters had to lay down in line, waiting for the fire fights to end, and then stand up and resume voting when the firing ceased.<sup>137</sup> The Salvadoran people's obvious dedication to free elections vindicates American commitment to that process.

Another part of successful political reform was increased evidence of pluralism in Salvadoran society. Each election had been hotly contested.<sup>138</sup> But a widened political spectrum, surely encouraged by reduced human rights abuses, had increased with each election in the



1980s. In the 1989 presidential election, even the left participated, forming the party of Democratic Convergence (CD), headed by FMLN political spokesman Guillermo Ungo. However, the FMLN guerrillas still boycotted the election and the CD only obtained 3.8 percent of the vote.<sup>139</sup>

Another key component of political reform was reform of the judicial process. In this area, largely unaffected by analogies to Vietnam, the United States achieved only limited success. American judge Harold Tyler, in a then-classified report to the Secretary of State, wrote about the murders of four American churchwomen in 1983 that:

to an extent that is impossible to detail in this report, the criminal justice system in El Salvador is in a state of disrepair. A handful of inexperienced, undereducated, and occasionally corrupt prosecutors represent a society that seems to have lost the will to bring to justice those who commit crimes against it. Intimidation and corruption of prosecutors, judges and juries are widespread, and a rigid legal system renders successful prosecutions all the more difficult. The military exerts a pervasive influence over the nation and...has sought to shield from justice even those who commit the most atrocious crimes.<sup>140</sup>

Tyler's comments in 1983, represent perhaps the nadir of U.S. efforts to transform the Salvadoran judicial system. After a fumbled attempt in early 1989 to arrest military officers for a 1988 massacre in the village of San Sebastian, the GOES would act more swiftly and make the dramatic arrest later that year two Army officers (one a Colonel)<sup>141</sup> for the murder of the six Jesuits and their two servants.<sup>142</sup> While many feel this did not go far enough,

the fact that the government felt confident enough to arrest military officers for crimes is a significant improvement. Despite some progress, no one would claim that U.S. efforts towards judicial reform have been a great success. This area will probably continue to be a critical Salvadoran weakness for many years to come.

#### The Success of Economic Reform

Trying to establish a healthy economy in the middle of a civil war, in a third world country, is certainly an unenviable task. But the United States attempted just that in El Salvador. The Reagan administration identified three economic goals consistent with the Kissinger Commission Report: "(1) stabilization of the economy; (2) growth of the economy; and (3) broadening of the benefits of growth."<sup>143</sup>

The State Department believed that there were three chief impediments to achieving those goals. They were "(1) the continuation of a serious insurgency; (2) the earthquake of 1986; and (3) the country's dependence on coffee and cotton for export revenues."<sup>144</sup> The administration considered the insurgency to be the most serious impediment.<sup>145</sup>

Infrastructure repair related to guerrilla sabotage was estimated at over \$600 million.<sup>146</sup> Loss of revenue due to lack of production and investment is estimated at over \$1.5 billion.<sup>147</sup> Additionally, the earthquake of 1986 caused an estimated \$1 billion in damages.<sup>148</sup> Finally, a drop in

world coffee and cotton prices during the 1980s added another loss of \$2.2 billion dollars.<sup>149</sup>

The odds would seem to be against success in the American efforts in the economy. However, much was accomplished in spite of these staggering obstacles to growth. Towards the first administration goal of stabilization, U.S. assistance slowed the negative growth evident from 1979 to 1982. State Department figures showed that "El Salvador has reversed the pattern of highly negative rates of GDP growth in the early 1980s, and has experienced positive rates of growth in every year since 1982."<sup>150</sup>

Towards the second administration goal of growth, U.S. assistance produced an average of one to two percent growth in the period 1984 to 1989.<sup>151</sup> However, the fall in commodity prices for coffee and cotton mitigated this success. The State Department also felt that "economic mismanagement by Salvadoran officials is responsible in part for the lack of progress."<sup>152</sup>

Thus, attainment of the second goal of economic growth had been a less than perfect success. However, considering the staggering obstacles in the path of economic development it was a miracle that there was any progress at all. Among other things, U.S. economic aid kept El Salvador from sliding into economic oblivion.

The third pillar of the administration's economic package was broadening the benefits. With expansion in the single digit column, there was little trickle-down effect. Therefore, the only area that could be addressed in this category was the area of land reform.

As mentioned earlier, land reform was largely a U.S. product. The architect of Vietnam's land reform, Roy Prosterman, resurfaced in El Salvador with a program designed to correct a perceived, centuries' old inequity. And, since compensation, a critical part of both Vietnamese and Salvadoran land reform, was too expensive for El Salvador, the U.S. footed the bill.

Land reform was a mixed success in El Salvador. Partial success can be measured by the fact that "by the end of 1988 some 25% of the rural landless population had received land under the reform program."<sup>153</sup> Thus, a significant dent had been made in the traditional large landholdings of El Salvador. But economic success was not to follow this accomplishment as food production dropped to below 1978 levels. Even AID reported land reform as "an economic failure."<sup>154</sup>

When viewed as an economic reform, land reform showed tepid results. The real success of land reform was that it irrevocably changed an ancient pattern of Salvadoran society and gave the Salvadoran people, for the first time, a real stake in their own land. As such, it could be said that it

took steam away from some of the injustices and inequities that contributed to the insurgency in the first place. It should, therefore, be considered a qualified success.

### Significance of the Study

As the cold war tensions dissipate, to be replaced by a new world order that seems anything but orderly, it is important for America to learn how to critically examine and react to events as they unfold in an increasingly chaotic world. Perhaps most appropriate to this research is a look at America's armed forces and how they have applied the lessons of both Vietnam and El Salvador to today's changing world.

In the U.S. Armed Forces, attempts are being made to prepare for the new world order. The older, but perhaps incomplete, title of "Low Intensity Conflict," familiar to those who served in both Vietnam and El Salvador, has been incorporated into a more encompassing U.S. Military field of study named "Operations Other Than War."<sup>155</sup> This incorporates previous Low Intensity Conflict lessons as well as, among others, a new emphasis on Humanitarian Assistance, Security Assistance, Peace Keeping, Peace Making, Peace Enforcing, as well legal and civil concerns, among others.

The United States Army has incorporated "Operations Other Than War" into its doctrine in the June 1993 edition of its Field Manual 100-5, Operations.<sup>156</sup> At the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College, this study has been

incorporated in the curriculum, combined with other instruction, to prepare officers "to deal with this most difficult and ambiguous environment."<sup>157</sup> It lists as one of its learning objectives to "Know why selected joint and combined military operations failed or succeeded at the operational level."<sup>158</sup>

As can be expected, C-520, Operations Other Than War: The Challenge of the Future, the Army's instructional manual currently being taught to officers at the Staff College, covers lessons learned from both Vietnam and El Salvador. Unfortunately, both sections miss incorporating some valuable lessons.

In its focus on Vietnam, the manual delves into the South Vietnamese's government own failures in the "Second Indochina War"<sup>159</sup> and deals with America's lessons learned only from the perspective of war crimes, centering on the infamous My Lai incident.<sup>160</sup> It never mentioned the things we did right in Vietnam, such as those successes which William Colby mentioned in Chapter II of this research. Instead it focuses on the shameful behavior of American troops at My Lai. The lesson of Vietnam deals with a perspective on war crimes and on officer responsibilities therein.

Vietnam and El Salvador both provide valuable lessons of what America did right. Oddly enough, in its focus on El Salvador, Operations Other Than War uses the

single source of Terry Lynn Karl's article from Foreign Affairs.<sup>161</sup> Although mentioning that El Salvador was the "scene of America's most prolonged military involvement since Vietnam,"<sup>162</sup> Karl avoids all other comparisons between the two conflicts.

Karl's article is appropriate to this research because it shows how the Army is using Karl's view as a sole source to draw incorrect conclusions for the future about the recent counterinsurgency in El Salvador. Some critical points that he makes, as shown earlier, are largely incorrect. That means, unfortunately, that America's great success story in El Salvador will go unlearned by Army officers who perhaps may benefit from these lessons more than any other segment of American society.

This research recalls the recent American effort to deal with a difficult and complex situation in El Salvador. The American effort in El Salvador was prepared with the lessons of Vietnam still fresh. Its outcome, a negotiated peace and a transformed political process, serves as a lesson of what can be done when careful study is made of the lessons of history. Ample lessons in American and world history exist to guide efforts in Operations Other than War. El Salvador is a good example of this. As such, the research shows how the lessons learned were applied to both help formulate and implement policy in El Salvador with the ghost of Vietnam hovering close by.

research shows how the lessons learned were applied to both help formulate and implement policy in El Salvador with the ghost of Vietnam hovering close by.



#### ENDNOTES

1. House of Representatives, U.S. Policy Toward El Salvador: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, March 5 & 11, 1981 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981), 11.
2. Jimmy Carter, "Crisis of Confidence Speech" (Televised 15 July 1979) extracted from President Carter: 1979. John L. Moore, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1979), 46-A.
3. Donald P. Kommers and Gilbert D. Loescher, Human Rights and American Foreign Policy, Reprint of "Commencement Address at the University of Notre Dame" May 22, 1977 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 303.
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8. Rand McNally: Universal World Atlas (New York: Rand McNally & Company, 1987), 239.
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11. Ibid., 291.
12. Thornton, 379.

13. Congressional Research Service: Report for Congress El Salvador, 1979-1989: A Briefing Book on U.S. Aid and the Situation in El Salvador (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, 1989), 81.

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16. Arnson, 2.

17. Paul Ramshaw and Tom Steers, eds. Intervention on Trial: The New York War Crimes Tribunal on Central America and the Caribbean (New York: Praeger, 1984), Title page.

18. Ibid., 31.

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20. LeFeber, 275.

21. Arnson, 2.

22. Ibid., 83.

23. Benjamin C. Schwarz, American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1991), iii.

24. Arnson, 3.

25. Schwarz, xvii.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 9.

28. Ibid.

29. National Security Archive, Preface.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 40. (Source: New York Times, 3/23/81 & 3/25/81 & 3/29/81).

32. Ibid., 25.
33. Ibid., 28-29.
34. Ibid., 47. (Source: New York Times, 2/19/82.
35. Tommie Sue Montgomery Revolution in El Salvador: Origins and Evolution (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982) 191.
36. Based on my personal recollection of official State Department publications 1987-1988. This was computed monthly by the embassy as a matter of policy. Special attention was paid to investigating the accuracy of the numbers to avoid a Vietnam style "body count" syndrome of numbers for numbers sake. This was not just a paper drill.
37. Editorial New York Times, January 2, 1992. "Who Won in Salvador? Everyone": "But even marxist guerrilla leaders, if they were realistic, now had to acknowledge that a groundswell of Salvadoran popular support for their cause was becoming increasingly unlikely. Instead, Salvadoran elections in March 1989 brought the far right to power."
38. Montgomery, 27.
39. Donald B. Vought, Military Review, "Preparing for the Wrong War?" (Ft Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, May, 1977), 32. Quote from Kansas City Star, Sunday Magazine, 15 August 1976. A very few officers, LTC Vought included, were trying to turn the Army's focus back to Vietnam and Low Intensity Conflict. But the prevailing attitudes were to put the bad experience out of sight and out of mind.
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41. Ibid.
42. Courtney E. Prisk, The Comandante Speaks: Memoirs of an El Salvadoran Guerrilla Leader (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 55 & 65.
43. Walter LeFeber, Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 245.
44. Ibid.

5. Max G. Manwaring and Courtney Prisk El Salvador at War: An Oral History (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1988), 372. Extract from Mexico interview with Marta Harnacker, November-December 1982.

46. Arnson, 3. Reprint from New York Times, March 3, 1982.

47. House of Representatives, 311. Reprint from Food Monitor, Peter Shiras, January/February 1981, Titled "The False Promise--And Real Violence--of Land Reform."

48. Marvin Gettleman, Patrick Lacefield, Louis Menashe, David Mermelstein, and Ronald Radosh. El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War (New York: Grove Press, 1981), 263.

49. Ibid.

50. David E. Hollar, Washington Post (Washington, D.C. March 12, 1981), 12.

51. Mark A. Meoni The Advisor: From Vietnam to El Salvador (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff College, MMAS Thesis, 1992), 124.

52. Schwarz, vi.

53. Ibid.

54. National Security Archives, 42.

55. I was briefed as such during my initial inprocessing at the USMILGRP in El Salvador. Also I was told "We're here to change the Officer Corps, not the soldiers." It was commonly recognized by the USMILGRP that changing the attitudes of the officers was critical to success in El Salvador. Effectively, El Salvador had no real NCO corps as Americans know it. Often Second Lieutenants would supervise duties covered by NCOs in our military.

56. Manwaring, 291.

57. House of Representatives, 98.

58. National Security Archives, 36.

59. Schwarz, vi.

60. Ibid., 49.

61. Ibid., 45.
62. Ibid., 45-46.
63. Gettleman, 268. From DOS press release, May 12, 1981: "Some differences between U.S. Involvement in Vietnam and El Salvador" 267-269.
64. Schwarz, 44.
65. Ibid., as quoted from Gruson "Land Reform and the El Salvador Crisis."
66. Ibid.
67. House of Representative, 310. Source: Food Monitor, Article by Peter Shiras.
68. Schwarz, vi.
69. John T. Fishel and Edmund S. Cowan, Military Review, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, January, 1988), 37. Extract from their article "Civil-Military Operations and the War for Moral Legitimacy in Latin America" 36-49. Their article expresses well USSOUTHCOM thinking from the period.
70. Erwin C. Hargrove Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of the Public Good (Baton Rouge, LA, Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 112.
71. Mower, 26.
72. Schmidt, vi.
73. House of Representatives, 5.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid., 7.
77. Ibid., 98.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid., 310.
80. Gettleman, xiii.
81. Ibid., 3.

82. Steffen W. Schmidt El Salvador: America's Next Vietnam? (Salisbury, NC: Documentary Publications, 1983), vi.

83. Ibid., v.

84. Ibid.

85. Ibid. 125.

86. Ibid., 192.

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88. Jean-Louis Clariond. El Salvador Arde: La Verdad Sobre la Tragedia Salvadoreña. (Guatemala: Edition Agotada, 1981), Title Page. The photographs in this edition are stark and realistic. His juxtaposition of photos from both FMLN and ESAF actions provide a balanced essay. His courage in getting out of the hotels in the capital to follow the real war gives him authenticity. He immediately saw the link between the FMLN and global Marxist-Leninist strategy.

89. Ibid.

90. Ibid., 182, 192.

91. Ibid. 182.

92. Ibid., 183.

93. Gettleman, 265. From "No Vietnam Parallel" by Ronald Reagan, Interview with Walter Cronkite, CBS News, March 3, 1981, 265-269.

94. Ibid., 266

95. Ibid., 242.

96. Ibid.

97. Ibid., 267.

98. Ibid., 269-271.

99. Ibid., 15 From "Dictatorships and Double Standards" Commentary, Vol. 68, No. 5, November 1979, 34-45

100. Ibid., 25.

101. Ibid., 10.

102. Ibid., 34. Quoted by Jeanne Kirkpatrick from Stephen Rosenfeld of the "Washington Post" date unknown.

103. Kommers, 303. See full quote at endnote 3.

104. Arnson, 3. Quoted from Alexander Haig.

105. Tim Golden, New York Times "Accord Reached to Halt Civil War in El Salvador" January 1, 1992, 1.

106. Editorial New York Times "Who Won in Salvador? Everyone", January 2, 1992, editorial page. This short editorial expresses perfectly the euphoria and guarded optimism of the days following the peace accords. In that spirit I felt the author was reluctant to "rock the boat" by recognizing a winner and loser in the conflict.

107. Arnson, 315.

108. Manwaring, 141.

109. Ibid., 125. Extract from "Concerning Our Military Plans: The Military Strategy of the FMLN" a document captured and transcribed by the Atlacatl Battalion near Perquin, El Salvador, date unknown, probably late 1983.

110. Ibid., 123. Extract from interview by CIDAMO originally published in Mexico, 1980, and later published in Revolution and Intervention in Central America, edited by Marlene Dixon and Susanne Jonas (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications/CM Associates, 1983), 41-43.

111. Ibid., 141. Extract from interview with Marta Harnecker, November-December 1982, originally published in Mexico.

112. Ibid.

113. Ibid., 373. Extract from interview with editors in San Salvador, 17 December 1986, 29 June 1987, and 23 September 1987.

114. Golden, 7.

115. Manwaring, 377. Extract from interview conducted at Carlisle Barracks, PA on 4 March 1986.

116. Congressional Research Service, CRS-6.

117. Manwaring, 379. Extracted from Duarte: My Story, Jose Napoleon Duarte (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1986) 209-213.

118. Ibid., 385. Extract from Duarte: My Story. Duarte states: The first guerrilla attack came the day after La Palma and confirmed my suspicions that Villalobos intended to exert influence, scorning Cienfuegos' 'weakness' in talking to us."

119. Ibid., 384.

120. Personal recollection of numerous Cristiani speeches, stating his willingness to negotiate. In fact, in the final negotiations in 1992/1992, the New York Times (1 January 1992) reports that Christiani's own party thought he was going too far in concessions in the fall of 1991.

121. Congressional Research Service, CRS-5. Extract from the Kissinger Commission's Report to the President Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, January, 1984. P. 104.

122. Schwarz, 5.

123. Ibid. 6.

124. Virtually all of the U.S. advisors in El Salvador were required to be proficient in Spanish. Most were knowledgeable of the country and the culture. During my tenure (1987-1989) over 50 percent of the USMILGRP were from hispanic background, reflecting the healthy percentage of hispanics in the United States and the U.S. Armed Forces. This percentage was obviously something the U.S. could not have hoped to accomplish in Vietnam. It could be debated whether being hispanic was an advantage or a disadvantage. I remember one Salvadoran Colonel wondering, half in jest, when he was going to get a "real" gringo advisor as the last two had been hispanic-Americans. I suspect the Colonel felt he could more easily "manipulate" a real Gringo. However, advisor training was more extensive in Vietnam due to perhaps the much larger advisor mission there. See MAJ Mark Meoni's MMAS "The Advisor: From Vietnam to El Salvador" for a detailed comparison of the El Salvador and Vietnam advisor.

125. Special Forces Sergeant Gregory Fronius died at his post in March 1987 in the FMLN attack on the Fourth (ESAF) Brigade headquarters at El Paraiso, Chalatenango Department, El Salvador. Many brave American servicemen and embassy employees, eight of whom died during my tour, gave their lives in this unsung cause but they did so as a result of capture and execution, assassinations, and accidents in the line of duty. Though I cannot prove it, I strongly feel that the FMLN avoided killing American advisors as a general rule. The realization that only one soldier died in actual



combat conditions was brought to my attention by Dr. John T. Fishel, former member of USSOUTHCOM staff, currently Latin American expert with Directorate of Joint and Combined Operations (DJCO), US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

126. Manwaring, 399. Extract from interview in August 1987, titled "An Unpredictable Ally" 398-399.

127. Ibid., 405. Extract from interview with Pickering in August, 1987, titled "Blessed With a Small Staff" 405-407.

128. R. A. Rail El Salvador Advisor: Toward a Military Personnel Advisory Doctrine (Kansas City, MO: Ragal Limited Editions, 1992) 3. I tend to disagree with Rail's assessment of Salvadoran field artillery skills. The Salvadorans never massed fires as the U.S. does. They didn't have the number of tubes needed to do that. Instead, they spread out guns, one to a unit, allowing them to pretty much cover the entire country, and providing minimal field artillery support to each brigade sized unit. Also, to effectively use indirect fires, you need to use map grid coordinates. With such a small country, with their intimate familiarity with the countryside, it was hard to convince the ESAF of the need to learn to use map coordinates for patrols, much less for calling in indirect fires. However, they did use mortars in the direct fire mode.

129. Ibid.

130. Manwaring, 291. From interview with COL James J. Steele, October and November 1986, titled "The Professionalization of the Salvadoran Military," 291-292.

131. Ibid., 292.

132. Congressional Research Service, CRS-12.

133. New York Times, 2 January 1992, quoted from unnamed AP source in article "At the Battlefield, Rebels Are Joyful" 7.

134. Personal recollection of various briefings during my tour in El Salvador.

135. Congressional Research Service, CRS-12.

136. Ibid., CRS-13.

137. I witnessed many parts of the 1989 election (I coordinated all the communications support) and spoke with U.S. members of the international observer teams. Violence by the FMLN was particularly intense early on voting day, accounting for the slightly lower turnout (58%). I sat on the upper floor of the Sheraton Hotel in San Salvador and watched FMLN bombs exploding every few minutes, all over the city, as the Salvadoran Air Force (FAS) fired rockets and miniguns at FMLN troops trying to infiltrate the city down the side of San Salvador Volcano. This was just the first hour after the polls were open! The FMLN committed many atrocities that day, such as the ambush of a truck load of twenty peasants on their way to vote near Cerro Verde. But two international reporters were killed that same day and the press became obsessed with that rather than the real story of the hard rebirth of Salvadoran democracy.

138. Congressional Research Service, CRS-12.

139. Ibid., CRS-13.

140. Schwarz, 33. Extract from The Churchwomen Murders: A Report to the Secretary of State (1983) p. 4.

141. The rank of Colonel in the ESAF is the second highest rank attainable, somewhat equivalent to a Lieutenant General in the U.S. Army. This constitutes a significant departure from the normal immunity that the Salvadoran military enjoyed previously.

142. Schwarz, 30-32.

143. Congressional Research Service, CRS-6. Extract from The U.S. and Central America: Implementing the National Bipartisan Commission Estimate.

144. Ibid.

145. Ibid.

146. Ibid.

147. Ibid.

148. Ibid.

149. Ibid., CRS-7.

150. Ibid.

151. Ibid., CRS-8.

152. Ibid.

153. Ibid., CRS-9.

154. Ibid., CRS-10. Extract from Economic Assistance to Central America: Conclusions of and AID-State-OMB Team

155. New course for 1993/94 U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth, KS: C520 Operations Other Than War. This replaces earlier course called Low Intensity Conflict.

156. Field Manual 100-5, Operations, (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 14 June 1993).

157. Operations Other Than War: The Challenge of the Future (Ft Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College), iv.

158. Ibid., ix.

159. Ibid., 93.

160. Ibid., 167, 169, 175, 187.

161. Ibid., 164. Extract from Foreign Affairs, Spring, 1992, "El Salvador's Negotiated Revolution" by Terry Lynn Karl, 147-164.

162. Ibid., 113.

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